



# JEEVADHARA

## SOCIO-RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS - I

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Vincent Sekhar

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

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## **Socio-Religious Movements Part-I**

Edited by:

**Vincent Sekhar**

Malloossery P. O.,

Kottayam - 686 041

Kerala, India

Tel: (91) (481) 2392530, 2397017

Mob: 9495519775

E-mail: [jcmanalel@gmail.com](mailto:jcmanalel@gmail.com)

Web: [www.jeevadhara.org](http://www.jeevadhara.org)

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## Editorial

Religions play a crucial role in politics and society and it is evident in the manner religious groups liaison with the government and their respective believers on key issues of collective identity and growth. The same is evident when believers make choices of all kinds and in many occupations, invoking a god, consulting a guru, or adhering to a certain vow. The inspiring personalities, be they the founders of religious heritages or their disciples, make a change in society, in thinking, and in the way of life of their believers. Necessitated by their motive to effect further ripples in personal and collective life, the community of believers promote themselves as catalysts of transformation, assuming their proactive role in a wider society. We do come across any number of such socio-religious (new) movements with a vision and motivation, ideals and mission. In India, the sectarian Shaiva and Vaishnava Bhakti movements sprouted everywhere from 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> CE and other reform movements in Bengal, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, etc. from 12<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> CE. We have examples of the Sikh movements like the Nirankari, Namdhari, and the Singh Sabha, the Sufi movements like the Chisti and similar orders, the Parsi movement like the Rahnumai Mazdayasnan Sabha, and the Barelwi Ulama movement among the Sunni Sufism in several parts of India. In the recent years, there are movements with fundamentalist slant of ideas and approaches to life in society, and those that promote specific purposes like interreligious harmony, like the Art of Living by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, which advocates a stress-free and violence-free life. These movements take the lead from their founders and establish associations, organizations, and institutions. These and other movements engage themselves in advocating specific philosophies and spiritualities of life in word and deeds and had a great impact on shaping

the contemporary society. This is similar to the global scenario of socio-religious movements, engaged in education and training of men and women for personal and collective growth and spiritual development. The current issue of *Jeevadhara* carries articles representing some of such movements in their variety of motives, word, and engagement.

**Dr. Vincent Sekhar**

Executive Director and Dean of Research

Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions

Loyola College

Chennai

E-mail: [sekharsj2010@gmail.com](mailto:sekharsj2010@gmail.com)

# Religions and Social Movements

**Michael Amaladoss**

The article highlights religions as social movements from a historical perspective. It searches the roots of Hinduism and Christianity and offers insights into how religious institutions should focus on their original charism in uplifting humanity. **Dr. Michael Amaladoss** <[michamal@gmail.com](mailto:michamal@gmail.com)> is the Director of the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions (IDCR), Chennai. A specialist in Asian Theology and Mission, Amal travels a lot for lectures and consultation. His latest two books are *Beyond Dialogue – Pilgrims to the Absolute* (ATC, Bangalore, 2008) and *Quest for God – Doing Theology in India* (Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 2013)

A starting question could be whether I should speak of “Religions and Social Movements” or “Religions as Social Movements”. Religions can be seen as social movements. On the other hand, social movements can simply be social with religions playing a part in it, sometimes an important one. So I plan to speak here of “Religions and Social Movements” since it would be, not merely a more neutral, but a more accurate theme.

There was a stage in world history, before the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, when all religions were cosmic religions, in the terminology of Aloysius Pieris. The world was seen as animated by cosmic forces, often personified as spirits. The sun, the wind, the water, the forest, the trees, the agricultural fields were all inhabited and/or directed by appropriate spirits. The humans had to propitiate them with gifts and sacrifices in order to obtain their favour. Natural calamities were seen as the anger of the gods. A supreme God was often recognized, but remained remote. Socially speaking, there was no great difference between society, culture and religion. They were mutually involving each other.



## From the Cosmic to the Metacosmic

Around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE and later there was, what some historians of religions call, an axial period. People began reflecting and looking into natural phenomena to discover deeper levels of being. In China there was Taoism, which looks on the whole of reality as the dynamic movement of the *yin* and the *yang*, the receptive and the active principles, the feminine and the masculine forces. Confucius evolved an ethical system that did away with a pantheon, acknowledging only an abstract 'Heaven'. The Indians affirmed the non-dual relationship between the *Brahman*, the 'substratum' of the universe, and the *Atman*, the principle of life and consciousness. This one principle underlay the multiplicity of the universe, including the gods. The Buddha opposed the Vedic sacrificial system and the pantheon underlying it and proposed a personal ethical discipline that opposed egoism and desire. The Prophets in Israel like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel saw Yahweh, not as the tribal god of Israel, but as the almighty Creator and Ruler of all. Plato in Greece spoke of the *Ideal* world of which the present world is only a shadowy reflection. All these reflections speak of a fundamental Reality of which our universe is only a manifestation, emanation or creation. The really *Real* is beyond the cosmos, but both immanent and transcendent. Of course, it is the transcendent dimension, which is new. It is beyond name and form, impersonal and personal. In this process, some Cosmic religions have now become Meta-cosmic, rooted in a transcendent principle.

## Experiencing the Real in the World

Once the distinction is made between the Real and the Phenomenal, some suggested that we have to leave the phenomenal in order to reach the Real. The Indians prayed: "Lead me from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to Light, from death to Immortality." Others however suggested that the Real is immanent in the world and that it is there that we have to experience it. The problem, of course, is that the humans were either ignorant of the Real and/or too attached to the unreal. Such attachment is shown in selfish behavior that leads to inequality and injustice in the world manifested in all sorts of suffering. Reaching and experiencing the Real becomes the goal of life. The Transcendent has



to be experienced in the immanent. The transcendent that is the goal is no longer individual, but collective, a community of all reality. Some thought that this would happen in another world and to reach it we have to renounce this one. Others thought that it is this world that has to be built up as a community, though it will be totally transformed into a new reality in the other world.

Let us take Hinduism as an example. The goals of life are listed as righteousness (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*), pleasure (*kama*), and liberation (*moksha*). Dharma involves living ethically in community. After having lived a full life in this way, one aims at liberation. However, the *sannyasis* renounce everything and aim directly at liberation. In the Bhakti tradition, however, not only people have to maintain the world through dharma, but God himself comes down to the earth as Avatars to help re-establish and uphold dharma. So building a community of dharma becomes a socio-religious responsibility. Aiming at moksha and encouraging others to search for moksha will be more a religious movement. But trying to build a dharmic community in the world is a socio-religious movement.

### **The Kingdom of God in the World**

Similarly, in Christianity, the Kingdom of God is the goal of life. Jesus, the incarnate God, proclaims the coming of the Kingdom in this world and inaugurates it through his preaching and miracles, death and resurrection. This Kingdom is not only an otherworldly reality, but has to start here and now in history, though it will be fully realized only in the other world beyond time (history) and space. The Church is the symbol and servant of the Kingdom in this world. The Kingdom is immanent in this world. But its full realization is transcendent. The Church then is a socio-religious movement that is being built up as a community of freedom, fellowship and justice in this world, in history. But it will reach its fulfillment beyond history. George Soares-Prabhu has described this beautifully.

When the revelation of God's love (the Kingdom) meets its appropriate response in man's trusting acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation, which sweeps through human history. The

movement brings *freedom* inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters *fellowship*, because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads onto *justice*, because it impels every true community to adopt the just societal structures, which alone make freedom and fellowship possible...

One cannot fully actualize the vision of Jesus: one can merely approach it asymptotically! Ultimately, then, the vision of Jesus indicates not the goal but the way. It does not present us with a static pre-fabricated model to be imitated, but invites us to a continual refashioning of societal structures in an attempt to realize as completely as possible in our times the values of the Kingdom. The vision of Jesus summons us, then, to a ceaseless struggle against the demonic structures of unfreedom (psychological and sociological) erected by mammon; and to a ceaseless creativity that will produce in every age new blueprints for a society ever more consonant with the Gospel vision of man. Lying on the horizons of human history and yet part of it, offered to us as a gift yet confronting us as a challenge, Jesus' vision of a new society stands before us as an unfinished task, summoning us to permanent revolution.<sup>1</sup>

The Church, as a symbol and servant of the Kingdom of God, is a socio-religious movement. It is called to build this world, including the humans, into the Kingdom. The cosmos too is called to be part of it. (cf. Rom 8:19-21) The world as it is now, because of human sin and the consequent inequality and injustice, is not a Kingdom community. But the Church is called to transform this world into the Kingdom, both by its example and by its service. This is actually a social movement, religiously inspired. Its focus is not heaven, but a transformed earth, so that it

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<sup>1</sup> George Soares-Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society," D.S. Amalorpavadass (ed), *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a*



becomes a new heaven and a new earth. John has described this in the book of Revelation.

See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. And the one who is seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' (Rev 21:3-5)

## From God to Others

This process from a transcendent to an immanent focus is seen very clearly in the Gospels. Asked about the greatest commandment of the Law, Jesus said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." Then he added: "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt 22:37-39) But on the last day of his life on earth, this double commandment becomes a single one. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (Jn 15:12) God seems to disappear from the scene. The vertical (loving God) is absorbed into the horizontal (loving the other). God is experienced and loved in the other(s). Jesus goes on to show what loving the other involves: service (washing the feet), sharing (bread and wine, becoming his own body and blood) and self-gift (giving his life unto death on the cross).

Jesus also gives this command a sacramental dimension. He shares bread and wine (food and drink), transforming them into his body and blood in the process and asking them to repeat the meal in his memory. He also exhorts and empowers them to forgive each other. Appearing to them after his resurrection, "he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.'" (Jn 20: 22-23) These will become the sacramental celebrations of the Eucharist and Reconciliation. Forgiving each other and sharing food (symbolic of life) in memory of Jesus' paschal mystery, they become the body of Christ – an intimate community. (1Cor 12:12-13) Their mission was not merely to enjoy this fellowship, but to spread it in the world and make the whole world into the Kingdom of God. Paul speaks of this as the gathering of all things in Christ (cf. Eph 1:3-10), who will reconcile



them with the Father (cf. Col 1:15-20) This is the Church's prophetic call and task. In this way, they are called to be a socio-religious movement, focused not only on the other world, but also on this one.

### **From Charism to Institution**

But sociologists tell us that movements in course of time tend to lose their prophetic thrust or charism and to become institutions. Religious movements tend to become focused on the other world and lose their prophetic impact on this one. They are no longer socially transformative. On the contrary they tend to justify and legitimize the existing socio-cultural institutions. One forgets mission and focuses on the maintenance of the status quo. This happened to the Church also after the first few centuries. Then arose the Religious orders, which take on the prophetic role both in the Church and in the world. In the beginning the hermits and monks witnessed to an alternative way of life focused on the Kingdom, praying and working. Later they also began to exert some influence for transformation in the Church around them. St. Francis of Assisi came with a new vision. He launched prophetic communities that live a life of poverty (non-attachment to wealth and comfort) and fraternity, but also seek to spread it in the Church and in the world. St. Francis even went to meet the Sultan in Egypt. St. Ignatius Loyola started a fully apostolic order, without monastic trappings, ready to go to the ends of the world – a task facilitated by the colonial movement. Though they helped the poor in various ways, their focus was otherworldly – saving souls. They lead the people to the sacraments and spread the Church in mission lands.

### **The Advent of Modernity**

Two developments in the 17<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> centuries bring about radical changes. The Enlightenment, depending on reason alone, and the growth of science challenge the Church. People get secularized. Religion is no longer the centre of their lives. The Church and the Religious become self-defensive. The industrial revolution results in an increase of poor people, the workers and the displaced. Many new religious congregations started to look after their needs. The missionary movement to spread the Church in foreign lands also flourishes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when colonialism gets stabilized in the Third World. The Church then becomes

a religious movement. Then Marx appears on the scene and wants, not only to understand the world through science, but to change it. Marxian ideology gives rise to non-religious, even anti-religious, socio-political movements for social transformation. Marxism, combined with anti-colonial movements, inspire many kinds of freedom and social reform movements across the world.

### **Socio-Political Movements**

In the 1970s there is the birth of 'liberation theology' in Latin America. Its orientation was mostly economico-political, though cultural analysis and spirituality were added later. But it never became really a movement for social transformation. This is true also of liberation movements elsewhere. In India, for instance, we have Dalit, Tribal and Feminist liberation movements. They have tended to promote the economic and political empowerment of these groups. Their identity is strengthened. But there has not been much effort at promoting social transformation so that a new human community of equals can be built up. The Church in India, specially the Religious congregations, focus on sacramental life and on helping the poor. But we do not see any focus on community building based on equality and justice. The Church itself is divided along caste, language and Ritual lines. The Religious congregations too have the same problems. They are neither models nor actors in a prophetic thrust to build community both inside and outside the Church. A minority syndrome further adds to efforts towards building community. The inclusive Kingdom vision is somehow absent.

In India, Mahatma Gandhi saw his movement as socio-political and religious, promoting harmony among them. His ashrams were like religious communities witnessing to the possibility of many religious and caste groups living together, creating a society of equals. He tried to promote economic, political, social and even religious equality also in the wider world. While his political movement of freedom from colonial power succeeded, other dimensions of his broad based social movement were soon forgotten. Ambedkar's movement for Dalit liberation has had some success in conscientizing the Dalits and empowering them economically and politically through reservations and organization. But the vision of a community where there will be equality and brotherhood among everyone

has not been realized, though Ambedkar included it in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution. His leading of a group of Dalit followers into Buddhism was a symbolic gesture. It may have liberated them from the religious dimensions of untouchability based on the principle of ritual purity and pollution. But it has not brought about equality between the different caste groups. Narayana Guru reformed and empowered the Ezhava community in Kerala. He reinterpreted 'advaita', as an indication of equality and unity, to support his vision. But he has not been able to bring about a wider social equality and community transcending caste barriers. Periyar in Tamil Nadu did try to empower the Dravidians. Today, apart from the two major, Dravidian parties, their minor ones and their political power games, all their social ideals have practically disappeared. The Hindutva is a communalistic socio-religious movement.

After this rapid historical survey it is time to reflect on the theme of movements themselves and their relationship to religion. I shall limit my comments to India with reference to Hinduism and Christianity and also to Islam.

## **Religious and Social Movements**

There are many religious movements focusing on religious goals. In Hinduism there are many gurus with their own following, almost establishing 'sects'. A few are more organized and survive even after their founders like the Ramakrishna mission. In Christianity there are the various Religious congregations. Some of them may involve the ordinary (lay) people also like the 'Focolarini' of the Third Orders of St. Francis and of the Carmelites, though these are not that much present in India. There are also less organized, but popular movements like the various Charismatic movements. Religions do encourage some social action like the helping the poor. Many groups are involved in education; but this does not have characteristics of a movement. They may also tend to favour members of their own religions. Some religious movements may be communalistic, having political overtones, like the Sangh Parivar and the Muslim league. They may also engage in occasional social and relief activities, often with a communal background.

As opposed to such religious movements, social movements focus on social goals like promoting social equality, social justice, and community



building, including peacemaking in situations of conflict. Thanks to the Enlightenment and Marxist traditions, which have influenced India during the colonial period and thanks also to the option of India to remain a secular society which treats all religions equally and which also distinguishes clearly between the secular-political and the religious sphere, there are many non-religious NGOs, promoting various economic and social goals. Given the fact that India is a multi-religious country, social movements can only be secular.

Should the secular movements be religious or multi-religious? My thesis would be that social transformation supposes some ethical principle. Ethical principle can be rooted in religion. One could say that it needs to be rooted in religion in order to be really effective. An examination of Asian religions and its contemporary leaders has shown that they are for social transformation.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, social movements may challenge religions to change or to rediscover their deeper roots. Let me illustrate this with reference to an example.

### **An Example: The Caste System**

Let me take the caste system. I think that the caste system is a form of hierarchical social organization. Such hierarchical social systems exist in any society. It may be rooted in race or in economic organization of society like feudalism. The caste system is based on the kind of work one is assigned in society. People who are engaged in some activities considered 'impure' by society are considered impure. The impurity may become ritual, when the people affected by it are forbidden to participate in certain ritual activities. I do not think that the ritual system is at the root of the caste system. The famous story in the Rig Veda in which people of different castes proceed from different parts of the body of the primordial human is a mythical justification rather than the origin of the caste system. The socio-cultural nature of the caste system is seen from the fact that it is also practiced by other religious groups like the Sikhs, the Muslims and the Christians. A group of people are considered, if not ritually, at least socially impure, so that they cannot be

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom. Liberation Theologies from Asia*. (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1997)

part of the social community. They are untouchable and oppressed – Dalit. Their oppression is multiple. They are economically poor, politically powerless, because they are a minority in a majoritarian democracy and socially marginalized. The Constitution of India has declared untouchability illegal. It has also made provision for reservations in educational institutions and in the government job market. This can help and has helped the economic uplift of the Dalits. But the caste system is not an economic one. Its removal depends finally on whether we accept all humans as socially equal. It is more than respecting the political and legal rights of individual humans. It is respecting and accepting the dignity of the other humans irrespective of what ethnic or cultural group they belong to, what language they speak, what religion they practice, etc. This involves a change of mental and cultural structures and attitudes. Metacosmic religions, which place God beyond the world, should be able to affirm such equality. There is a popular story of how a Dalit helps Sankara to understand that, if all are one in the Atman, caste discriminations are meaningless. Christians will say all are equally God's children.

A social movement that wants to promote the social equality of all the humans would focus, not only on the economic and political betterment of the Dalits, but on the change of mind, especially of the non-Dalits, that all humans indeed are socially equal and any discrimination on the basis of caste, ethnicity, etc. is wrong. It is on this basis that one can bring about peace in the midst of conflicts based on the caste. It may be good to recall here that caste conflicts and discrimination in India take place not only between Dalits and others, but also between other caste groups. The existence of caste or ethnic or other groups is not a problem. In a sea of humanity smaller supportive groups may be helpful. They exist all over. What is wrong is their hierarchical organization so that one group is considered socially inferior to the other.

## **Religions can Help**

In this situation, religion can help in two ways. Negatively, it can attack any principle that justifies caste discrimination. I think that at the moment Hinduism offers such a justification in terms of karma. People like Gandhi and Narayana Guru have shown how Hinduism needs to be reinterpreted –

and reformed. People like Periyar have condemned the domination by one caste in the field of religion and have promoted practices like self-respect marriages. Positively, religion can show that, in the sight of God, all humans are equal. This may not be easy in Hinduism since birth in a particular caste may be caused by one's karma. Eventually one can say that any karma is one's own responsibility before God and it need not be a cause of social discrimination, because the person behind the karma is a free agent who can overcome it either by his efforts or by God's grace. In Christianity, all are God's children, especially when they are reborn in Baptism and sit around a common table in the Eucharist. So there is no religious reason at all for social discrimination. This will be true of Islam too: all are equal before Allah. In this way, promoting social equality and community can be the goal of a social movement, which aims at changing people's minds and value systems. In this process, the religions can contribute their own inspiration and perspectives.

### **The Christian Contribution**

I would like to say a special word about the possible Christian contribution. I have said above that the two sacraments that Jesus specially bequeathed to the Christians are Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Reconciliation had a social dimension. When an individual did something publicly to hurt the sentiments of the community by doing violence to one or more members of the community, it expelled him/her for a period and readmitted him only after that person had made public amends. But unfortunately, it has lost its public dimension altogether. Now individuals go and whisper to a priest their sins and are forgiven. The social dimension of reconciliation and the consequent building up of community is totally lost. Similarly, the Eucharist was the celebration of community. The Acts narrates to us how the first Christians pooled their wealth and lived a common life of sharing and expressed this fellowship in the Eucharistic meal, thus making it sacred. (cf. Acts 2:44-47) When economic disparity interfered with such experience of community in Corinth, Paul condemned them strongly. (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-33) It is in this context that Paul also speaks of the diversity of the gifts of the Spirit, of how they are the body of Christ and how love must be what makes them one community. (cf. 1 Cor 12-13) But over the centuries, the Eucharist is seen more as a sacrifice to God than a meal



and the community symbolism is not that strong. The vertical dimension is stronger than the horizontal, whereas the horizontal should have led us to the vertical. It is when we become one with each other in love, that God in Christ bodily becomes one with us. But in India, in some places, especially in rural areas, caste discrimination is practiced in various ways in the very celebration of the Eucharist, undercutting its social meaning. If the social dimension of the two sacraments is restored, they can be used to reinvigorate the Christian community and make it a model to the others.

By actively promoting practices like inter-caste marriages, which prophetic leaders like Periyar had encouraged, the Christians can become a prophetic community at the support of a social movement that reaches out to everyone beyond itself. In this way the Church can contribute to the building up of a Kingdom community in the world. I think that the Church today is too much inward looking. A lot of efforts go into the celebration of the sacraments. There is insistence on individual morality. But there is no conscious effort to build community both within the Church and in the world. This cannot be done without a wider social transformation. For this Church needs to collaborate with all people of good will, whether openly religious or not.

### **Broadening our Perspectives**

When the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences met for their first assembly in Taipei, Taiwan, in 1974, it described the mission of the Church as a threefold dialogue of the Gospel with the many poor, the rich cultures and the living religions of Asia. Most people take the option for the poor seriously and go out to help the needy, the refugees, the marginalized, etc. But they do not seem to know the real implications of the dialogue with cultures and religions. The dialogue of the Gospel with Indian culture is not only to make the Church more Indian. This is necessary so that the Church in India can be a more effective witness and not marginalized as 'foreign'. But the Gospel, in dialoguing with Indian culture, must aim at transforming Indian culture, purifying it from whatever not in conformity with the Gospel, like caste discrimination, the oppression of women, the dowry system, consumerism and corruption. These are not primarily religious issues, but socio-cultural ones. Where are the social movements tackling these problems today?

Similarly, dialogue with religions is not merely being friendly with the believers of other religions or engaging in intellectual discussion, though these may be necessary. It is also to reform religions, where necessary, like the karma theory or our way celebrating the sacraments, and to collaborate with them in transforming society and culture through appropriate motivation and inspiration. A minority religion like Christianity will not be able to bring about any social transformation without the collaboration of other religions and other people of good will. Sometimes there may be people, who are not believers in any religion, but who are interested in social transformation in terms of social justice and equality. A social movement then becomes the living context in which the triple dialogue of evangelization takes place in a meaningful way.

As I had said earlier, the life and work of the Church today seems to be limited to two areas: promoting the participation of the people in religious celebrations through the sacraments and popular devotions and caring for the poor in various ways. The Church seems very little involved in promoting socio-cultural reform, through an active dialogue with cultures and religions. Yet, without this we cannot build up Kingdom communities in the world. Some enlightened NGOs may be doing something in this field. But it is high time that we get involved in socio-cultural and religious reform movements if our Christ-given goal is to start building up God's Kingdom on this earth. Only then will our daily prayer: "Thy Kingdom come!" will be meaningful.

IDCR, Loyola College  
Chennai - 600 034

# Socio-Religious Movements in India: Issues and Outcomes

**Prakash Louis**

The article distinguishes social movements from religious movements in their anatomy and structure, their various categories, and describes some of the religious movements in India and their contributions. **Dr. Prakash Louis** <[prakashlouis2010@gmail.com](mailto:prakashlouis2010@gmail.com)> is the Director of Indian Social Institute, Bengaluru. As leading professional studying social movements in the country, Prakash has been actively involved in advocacy for Dalits, Tribals, and women, training officials and others on human rights. Two of his popular books are *Rights of the Minorities in India* Political Sociology of Dalit Assertion (Gyan Books Pvt. Ltd., 2014) and *Political Sociology of Dalit Assertion* (Gyan Publishing House, October 2003).

From a careful reading of the social movements, it can be stated that social movements are collective social actions aimed at either demanding a change or resisting change in any or total realms of social life. They propose and pursue particular objectives, forming organizations. Social movement can take the shape of a reform movement or demand for radical change. In the case of the later, social movement can generate conflicts and tensions. Social movements are the outcome of the existing social structure and they in turn affect these structures. Thus, social movements leave their footprints on the social structures, from where it came into existence. A careful sociological examination of the various social movements that are unfolding themselves suggest the diversity of the demands, the intensity of the dissent and the direction these movements take. They also call for a serious analysis of the interconnectedness of various issues that give rise to social movements.



Different authors have looked at social movements in different ways. Paul Wilkinson observes that, “A social movement is a deliberate collective endeavour to promote change in any direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution, or withdrawal into ‘utopian’ community” (1971, p 27). According to Gusfield (1952, p 2) “Social movements are socially shared activities and beliefs directed towards the demand for change in some aspect of the social order”. He further explains that social movements are products of the interaction of people mutually influencing each other. The idea of movement suggests efforts towards achieving change. It also involves beliefs-perceptions of what is wrong with the existing society, the culture, or the institution, and what can and should be done about it. Movements seek to change the society. Because of this, movements are focal points of conflict in society and usually generate public issues. Collective action implies discontent with an existential situation and some desire to create a new one.

It needs to be stated that both social movements and religious movements are both historical and contemporary. One may not be in a position to say from when social and religious movements came in to existence. However, one can venture out to say that these existed from the beginning of human kind. The form, shape and the dynamism surely might have been different at different times. It is also a fact that social and religious movements were and are contested.

For the sake of differentiating between various contexts of human existence where movements unfold themselves, movements can be classified under the following groupings. The first category is the classical social movements such as labour movements, trade union movements, peasant movements etc. Some social scientists are of the view that these were basically influenced by Marxian framework of analysis. The second category is new social movements (NSM) which were supposed to have been deviated from the Marxian framework of analysis. These are ethnic movement, environmental movement, women’s movement etc. The third category of movements is global social movements. These movements are transnational movements cutting across many countries and continents. They are international labour movement, world social forum, environmental movements etc.

But it is sociologically untenable to make a neat category like this. Since, social and religious movements deal with human beings, there are many common aspects in all these categories of movements. It is safe to identify various movements that have unfolded in the human history. In the Indian context these are: labour movement, trade union movement, peasant movement, anti-caste movement, ethnic movement, naxalite movement, environmental movement, women's movement, dalit movement, tribal movement, fish workers movement, religious movement, anti-liquor movement, Maoist movement, civil liberties movement, human rights movement, democratic rights movement, anti-globalization movement etc. In this paper, an attempt is made to spell out the issues and outcomes of social and religious movements in India.

### **Social Movements**

There are different factors that facilitate the emergence of social movements. According to T.K.Oommen, one can list multiplicity of structural determinants, which facilitate or block the emergence of social movements. But the most critical factor is the political value of a system as enshrined in its constitution and reflected in the route to socio-economic development it pursues and the competing ideologies. This value package broadly projects future vision of a society [1990, p 32].

Different social movements have emerged from different social settings trying to answer various needs of people and following diverse paths. For a proper study of social movements and social change the premises are: social movements are essentially related to social change and therefore to the social structure; social movements are a product of the social structure and hence emerge out of certain conditions in the social structure of which they are the products; and finally social movements have a recognizable structure in terms of which they are rendered functional relative to their goals. Therefore, a social movement is a product of the social structure and has consequences for it. It is an agent of change, though not the only one, and at the same time it has a target on which it operates [P.N.Mukherji, 1977, p 38].

Social movements seldom emerge spontaneously; instead they require long periods of preparation at the individual, group, and societal level. No social movement emerges until there is a political opportunity available,

a context of social problem as well as a context of communication, opening up the potential for problem articulation and knowledge dissemination. Moreover, social movements are not launched by leaders alone. They erupt whenever favourable conditions are present. Movement leaders utilize this and lead the movement.

Social scientists based on their analysis of various theories of social movements state that social movements are imminent, and they are expressive extensions of basic social conditions. They further assert that social movements are inalienably linked with certain relatively permanent, generally inevitable and stubborn social structural conflicts and contradictions, which inhere in the very nature of human society and social organizations.

M.S.A.Rao states that, a social movement undoubtedly involves collective action as distinct from individual action. However, only when the collective action is somewhat sustained, as distinct from a sporadic occurrence, does it take the form of a movement. Secondly, a social movement is generally oriented towards bringing about change, either partial or total, in the existing system of relationships, values and norms, although there are efforts that are oriented towards resisting change and maintaining the status quo. [1979, p 1]. From the above presentation we can say that social movements are a collective action with formal or in-formal organization of people to achieve certain explicit objectives.

Most of the studies on social movements speak about four components of social movements. They are: 1) objectives, 2) organization, 3) strategy, and 4) ideology. A brief understanding of these components will help us in the interpretation of the social and religious movements.

**1. Objectives:** refers to the motive force behind the collective social action. Different movements emerge with different objectives, which they want to achieve. People revolt against a particular social way of life motivated by the need to change that system. Or some oppose the move to change the present system and engage in collective action to resist change. Martin Luther King led the American Civil Rights Movements one of the most famous social movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The objective of this movement was to obtain equal rights to all the Afro-Americans in the United States of America.



**2. Organization.** In the social movement literature, organization refers to the collectivity of people with a specified goal or purpose. Paul Wilkinson while talking of social movements has this to say about organization. "A social movement must evince a minimal degree of organization, though this may range from a loose, informal or partial level of organization to the highly institutionalized and bureaucratized movement and the corporate group." [1971, p 27]. According to Lenin 'without a strong organization, tested in the political struggle carried on under all circumstances and in all periods, there can be no talk of a systematic plan of activity, enlightened by firm principles and unswervingly carried out, which alone is worthy of being called tactics'. [Collected Works, Vol.31, p 464].

Organization denotes membership and recruitment of leaders and cadres. It also refers to the interconnectedness of various units of the organization. Discussion on leadership takes us to the realm of intellectuals. Antonio Gramsci presents two types of intellectuals. 'Organic intellectuals, formed in the process of the formation of new historical classes, and traditional intellectuals, who carried out their intellectual activities in traditional institutions like the church and the academy' [Gramsci, 1971]. There are some questions, which enable one to understand the objectives and the organization of a social movement. 'Why are some people rather than others recruited into a particular social movement or organization? While there are many movements operative how is it that people come to participate in one movement rather than in another? Why do some movements/organizations attract a larger following and grow at a more rapid rate than others?'

Social movement literature suggest that the ultimate decision to participate in a movement would depend on four limiting conditions: 1) the occurrence of a specific recruiting attempt, 2) the successful linkage of movement and identity, 3) support for that linkage from persons who normally serve to sustain the identity in question, and 4) the absence of strong opposition from others on whom other salient identities depend.

**3. Strategy** refers to the programme and the means employed to achieve an end. J. Wilson states that, 'social movement is a conscious,

collective, organized attempt to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by non-institutionalized means' [1973, p 8]. For Wilson, utilization of non-institutional means or what the radical movements call 'extra-parliamentary means' are part of the strategy adapted by the organizations to achieve their aims. While talking of strategy, some of the thinkers focus on mobilization strategy. They say that in its early phases a budding social movement must constitute itself through more or less traditional means of mobilization, by creating its own organizations and its own network in order to create a sense of collectivity and to insure its continuity over time and place. Central to this process of self-formation is the constitution of an 'Other' against which the budding movement will interact.

**4. Ideology** refers to value structure, which motivates individuals and groups to think and act in a particular way for a cause. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines ideology as a system of ideas concerning a phenomenon, especially of social life. According to Goran Therborn [1980, p 1] 'ideology is that aspect of the human condition under which human beings live their lives as conscious actors in a world that makes sense to them to varying degrees. Ideology is the medium through which this consciousness and meaningfulness operate'. For John Wilson, 'ideology is a generic name given to those beliefs which mobilize people into action in social movements'. [1973, p 91]. Thus, ideology serves as logical justification for a group's pattern of behaviour, its attitude and its goals.

Marx conceived the social process in term of changes brought about by the hostile relationship that emerges between the forces of production and relations of production. Marx argued that this social process in course of time results in the formation of two classes: one which owns the means of production and the other which produces for the owner. This exploited class is called to overthrow this social system. This overthrowing of the existing system can be done only through a revolution. He further argued that this revolution is necessary, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can succeed only in a revolutionary situation in ridding itself of all muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew. [Selected Works, Vol. I, p 40]. Thus, for

Marx, social relationships and structures are not static but they are in a process of change. The guiding principle of this process of change is the unequal relationship between those who own the means of production and those who work for them. When this inequality is accentuated further, the revolutionary changes are initiated by the proletariat. This in general is the basic ideological principle of Marxian thought of social change.

In the understanding of the social scientists who study social movements, ideology not only provides the motivating force but also defines the aims and objectives of the movement. Ideology searches for new sources of legitimacy and rationalizes both activity and motivation. Going further, it can be stated that, ideology deals with the broader view of the existing society, how it is stratified, how it functions and how it ought to function. Through ideology a collective orientation to social life is expressed. When we talk of the ideology of militant peasant organizations, we are talking about principles that critically look at the existing social structures and they also propose total change in the existing system. In this regard it is to be noted that a radical ideology is imparted by leadership especially an external leadership. In the initial stage the demands may be of moderate nature but in the course time, with their demands not being met, supporting ideologies will be welcomed and these may be even militant in nature. Thus we see that ideology is a set of principles held by a group of people, or a society as a whole and these principles influence the behaviour pattern of that people. These principles also propose an alternative form of society.

Thus, it can be stated that objectives, organization and strategy lead to production of meaning in collective action. Collective action is further strengthened by an ideology. These in turn ensure the emergence and expansion of social and religious movements.

### **Types of Social Movements**

Social scientists distinguish between several types of social movement: Wilson favoured a typology that recognized four kinds of social movements. 1) Transformative movements seek to change the total social structure often by violence means or in anticipation of some cataclysmic change. This was basically pointed to millennial and fundamentalist



religious movements. 2) Reformatory movements aim at partial change to try to offset current injustices and inequalities. The adherents and followers of such movements believe that positive change to remove such features will create a more just social order and a more effective and viable polity. 3) Redemptive movements involve the total change of an individual whose problems are divorced from their social context and reduced to the issue of personality change and personal betterment. Religious movements and new religious movements are examples of this. 4) Alternative movements refer to the countercultural values, the rejection of materialism and the development of unconventional lifestyles. The adherents of these movements do not want to change the system, nor do they necessarily seek to reform it. Many seek rather to develop viable, sustainable alternative life style (R.Cohen. 2000. p 2).

M.S.A.Rao on the other hand identifies three types of social movements. They are: a) reform movements which aim at partial change in the value system and consequential changes in the quality of relationships, b) revolution which is identified with radical changes in the totality of social and cultural systems c) transformative movements aim at bringing about middle level structural changes in the traditional distribution of power and in the system of differential allocation of resources ([1979, p 12).

Some observations need to be made here on the above-presented typologies of social movements. These typologies are not comprehensive but they point to the various aspects of social movements. Also, as these typologies deal with the same social phenomenon they cannot be neatly separated into analytical categories. For instance, an ideological movement cannot function without an organization however loosely framed organization it may be. Further, an objective is often the starting point for the emergence of a movement.

Before we conclude this section, it is pertinent to sum up the foregoing discussion. The global social eruptions of the late 1960s and '70s, produced as results of the contradictions of the post-war order and signaling its crises and transformation, triggered far-reaching theoretical reverberations. As capitalist restructuring has continued and intensified in the 1980s and '90s and as it is being consolidated ideologically and politically through neoliberalism and neoliberal institutionalization, it has

provoked new waves and modalities of protest and resistance. These in turn have transformed the new social movements as well as the theories about them and about the social reality that place social movements at their centre. A growing number of critical theorists acknowledge that as phenomena, social movements signal profound shifts in the social reality and provoke new analytical, theoretical and political questions [Conway: 2007. 21]. It is not that movements of various kinds were not taking place. But what is pertinent to take note of is that a much broader, faster and greater social phenomenon called social movements unfolded during this period.

### **Religious Movements**

In common parlance, religious movement is a movement intended to bring about religious reforms. According to James A. Beckford, 'a religious movement is a formal or informal mobilization of people, material resources, ideas and feelings in pursuit of objectives dictated by concerns deemed ultimately significant but largely outside the framework of conventional religious activities'. He goes on to say that such religious movements constitute complex fields of social relations, ideas, sentiments and resources. The salience of particular components in each field varies from movement to movement and from time to time. He gives Pentecostalism as an example of religious movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century .it has developed into a worldwide Christian movement affecting tens of millions of sympathizers and participants. It is institutionalized and also informal [Conway. 2007, p 169].

In the Indian context, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) can be seen as a religious, national, cultural and ethnic religious movement utilizing religion for political purposes and utilizing politics for religious dominance and supremacy. Jehovah Witnesses through unremitting campaign for their religious freedom have become a global religious movement. The Protestant Reformation is seen as a religious movement of the 16th century that began as an attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church and resulted in the creation of Protestant churches. There was also counter reformation from the Roman Catholic Church reaffirming some of the principles and practices that the Protestant Reformation movement denied. Wahabism is considered by its followers as the first

great modern expression of the awakening of the Arab Islam in the 18th century, which advocated “pure faith’.

From various literatures of religious movements one gathers that religious movements, representing dissatisfaction with conventional religion and commitment to change, tend to be in the forefront of positive and negative responses to globalization. Globalization has also affected the manner in which religion is today and religious movements are and will be.

It is interesting to note that like in the realm of social movements in religious movements too there are differentiation in terms of religious movements and new religious movements. In the past, in the media terminology, new religious movements were referred to cults. This is more a negative or a popular understanding of new religious movement. But over the years, students of sociology of religion tried to understand reforms, changes, developments in religious sphere and termed it as new religious movement. From the review of literature, one can state that new religious movements are inclusive, syncretic in approach, use modern technology, utilize both religious and materialistic aspects of human life, some hold on fundamental or original tenets of religious traditions, while others try to bring reform in these etc. In contrast to earlier analysis of social reform, the scholars of sociology of religion of new social movements strive to work from a more scientific perspective on contemporary religious phenomenon, predominantly in the western hemisphere.

Roy Wallis differentiates between world-rejecting, world-affirming and world-accommodating movements. The first type condemns society as a whole, including its institutional structure and values and wants to replace that world with another set of values and institutions. The second type, stresses the enrichment of spiritual life of individuals as opposed to the gaining of worldly possessions and there is often an emphasis on the collective life as an end in itself. The third type claim to possess the means to enable people to unlock their physical, mental and spiritual potential, without the need to withdraw from the world. Thus according to this typology, the world-affirming type focuses on individual changes whereas the world rejecting type has as a goal redoing society itself (P.B. Clarke. 2006, p 582).

## Religious Movements in India

Religious movements in India in the medieval Indian period stands out in one major common characteristics – viz, Bhakti or love as a path to God irrespective of whether the movements come under Hinduism or Islam or independent of both. The basic essence and even defining characteristics of all religions turned out to be Bhakti. In spite of tussle between rulers on the political plan, the people as such could see an eye to eye and establish a spiritual rapport with each other because of this. One of the reasons for this was that the religious teaching was available for people in their own language. Secondly, Bhakti movements were not guided from above, but emerged mainly from the working classes. The Bhakti saints included potters, cobblers, weavers, cotton-carders, blacksmiths, washermen, gardeners, peasants, grocers, shepherds, plain labourers and even a butcher. A working class that emerged developed a mutual rapport irrespective of differences in religion and linguistic background and they found a unifying factor in Bhakti movement. Hence, one finds great rapport between Bhakti movement and Sufism. Just as there was some tension between *brahmins* and Bhakti saints, there was also tension between Sufis and *mullas* and *maulvis*. It is this unification of people under the Bhakti and Sufism period which denied separate identities of people following Hinduism and Islam in India. But later period singled out the separate identities based on religion and thus also created huge void between these two communities (J.S. Grewal. 2006).

The urgent need for social and religious reform that began to manifest itself from the early decades of the 19th century arose in response to the contact with Western culture and education. The weakness and decay of Indian society was evident to educated Indians who started to work systematically for their removal. They were no longer willing to accept the traditions, beliefs and practices of Hindu society simply because they had been observed for centuries. The impact of Western ideas gave birth to new awakening. The change that took place in the Indian social scenario is popularly known as the Renaissance.

Among the various socio religious reformers in India, Kabir stands out as a very inclusive and pragmatic reformer. Kabir was influenced by the prevailing religious mood of his times, such as old Brahminic Hinduism,



Tantrism, the teachings of Nath Yogis and the personal devotionism of South Indian saints mixed with the imageless God of Islam. Religious scholars are of the view that Kabir is the first Indian saint to have harmonized Hinduism and Islam by preaching a universal path which both Hindus and Muslims could tread together.

Kenneth Jones pointed out that in pre-colonial Punjab, there was one evolutionary religion, Hinduism and two prophetic faiths, Islam and Sikhism. The British added another prophetic faith, Christianity. Religious movements such as the Arya Samaj, Sanathan, Ahmadiya and Singh Sabha reacted against the orthodox leaders of their faith, but in the conflicting relations between Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. Religious movements cannot be understood without reference to other religious and sectarian movements and the wider political context (K. Jones. 1994, 120-21).

While socio religious reforms were taking place in Hinduism, reform movements among the Muslims did not lag behind. Movements for socio-religious reforms among the Muslims emerged late. Most Muslims feared that Western education would endanger their religion, as it was un-Islamic in character. During the first half of the 19th century only a handful of Muslims had accepted English education. The Muhammedan Literary Society, established by Nawab Abdul Latif in 1863, was one of the earliest institutions that attempted to spread modern education. Abdul Latif also tried to remove social abuses and promote Hindu- Muslim unity.

In the Indian sub-continent, the following religious reform movements are identified by scholars: Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Parsee Reform, Muhammadan Reform, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission to name a few.

An analysis of the reform movements of the 19th century brings out several common features: 1) All the reformers propagated the idea of one God and the basic unity of all religions. Thus, they tried to bridge the gulf between different religious beliefs; 2) All the reformers attacked priesthood, rituals, idolatry and polytheism. The humanitarian aspect of these reform movements was expressed in their attack on the caste system and the custom of child marriage; 3) The reformers attempted to improve the status of girls and women in society. They all emphasized

the need for female education; 4) By attacking the caste system and untouchability, the reformers helped to unify the people of India into one nation; 5) The reform movements fostered feelings of self-respect, self-reliance and patriotism among the Indians.

Another pertinent sociological fact is that like social movements, religious movements too were products of their times. In his study of the socio religious reform movements in British India, Kenneth Jones states that the existing milieu like the uneven development of a colonial milieu and the persistence of indigenous forms of socio-religious dissent produced two distinct types of movements. 1) Transitional movement: it had its origins in the pre-colonial world and arose from indigenous forms of socio-religious dissent, with little or no influence from the colonial milieu, either because it was not yet established or because it had failed to affect the individuals involved in a particular movement. 2) Acculturative movement: it originated within the colonial milieu and was led by individuals who were products of cultural interaction. Though these movements were influenced by the colonial milieu but their aims rested on the indigenous heritage of social and religious protest (1994,p3).

### **Contribution of the Religious Movements**

1) Many reformers like Dayanand Saraswati and Vivekananda upheld Indian philosophy and culture. This instilled in Indians a sense of pride and faith in their own culture. 2) Female education was promoted. Schools for girls were set up. Even medical colleges were established for women. This led to the development, though slow, of girls' education. The cultural and ideological struggle taken up by the socio-religious movements helped to build up national consciousness. They, thus, paved the way for the growth of nationalism. 3) Most of the Sufis were persons of deep devotion who were disgusted by the vulgar display of wealth and degeneration of morals following the establishment of the Islamic empire. Many of these saints did not establish an order, but became figures of popular generation, often for the Muslims and Hindus alike. 4) Technological changes were either brought about or were used for religious purposes. For example, making paper and printing was used extensively by the religious propagation and this in turn improved the quality and led to the spread of technology. 5) As a result of religious movements the status of women was raised and they were joining the social movements and political

struggles against the British rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 6) Due to the spread of the ideas of liberalism, scientific attitude and rationalism, many of the age-old practices and customs were put to serious scrutiny.

## Conclusion

Movement developments in the 1970s and '80s, especially of feminism and antiracism in the west and anti-caste, anti-ethnic (non-tribal) in India clearly ruptured the development of social and religious studies. It also raised questions about religious beliefs and practices, power, politics of power, political economy etc. Thus, socio religious movements are products of the existing socio religious milieu and these in turn influence the social structure. Further, socio religious movements produce knowledge through their every day practices of survival, resistance, reform, organization and solidarity. Progressive social movements produce new and distinct knowledge about the world as it is and as it might or should be, and how to change it. Movement based knowledge is largely tacit, practical and unsystematized. It is partial and situated, grounded in activist –social and religious- practice, fostered by concrete engagement in social struggles and embedded in specific times and places. Hence, to attempt to make a neat category of social and religious movements would be underlying their very nature and dynamism.

Research about social movements occurs in virtually all disciplines concerned with the study of society. Each discipline is marked by its particular approaches, assumptions and questions about the study of the social reality and therefore, the research reflects a range of social, political, religious, theoretical and epistemological traditions.

Down the centuries, social and religious ideas have on the one hand, upheld status quo and kept socio religious groups and communities organized and united. But they have also resulted in a language of protest, innovation and expression of individuality and separate identity. They have also either sharpened collective identity or led to crisis of this identity. They provide vast scope for reinterpretations in order to legitimize the aspirations of various sections of the population and to justify changes in the existing social relationships or in maintaining the existing social order. Hence, it can be stated that socio religious movements of the past and the present continue to raise to the scholars fundamental epistemological and methodological questions.



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Director, Indian Social Institute  
Bengaluru

# Socio-Religious Movements: A Search for Spirituality

Poulose Mangai

The article highlights two important movements, one Hindu and the other Sikh, founded by Sri Narayana Guru and Sant Nirankari Baba Buta Singh. It describes their origin, spiritual foundation, and mission in India and abroad, and their message to the globe.

*Dr. Poulose Mangai* <[mangaisj@gmail.com](mailto:mangaisj@gmail.com)> teaches systematic and spiritual theology at Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi. He has a doctorate in theology from St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, Bangalore. His doctoral work on people's movements has been published by ISPCK, Delhi under the title *Spirituality of People's Movements: A Christian Search in the Indian Context* (2012).

## 1. Introduction

Numerous social reform movements with religious bearings emerged in India from the beginning of the early 19<sup>th</sup> and the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It may broadly be said that during this period, caste-based hierarchical organization of Indian society fostered many dehumanizing prejudices, customs and practices like untouchability, bonded labour and sati. These prejudices, customs and practices enjoyed religious sanctions and approval. Reform was called for and there arose across the nation many enlightened thinkers and reformers who subscribed to the revolutionary and democratic ideas of human dignity, liberty, equality, fraternity, women's right to education, etc. These ideas, which originated in the west and were being introduced in India through

modern education, undeniably played a catalytic role in the process of social transformation through reform movements.

In the Indian context, most of the social evils were tied to religious beliefs and ideas and so almost always reformation of society and reformation of religions went together. The social reformers were mostly religious reformers as well. Some of the more illustrious among the socio-religious reformers and movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are Raja Ram Mohan Roy and his Brahmo Samaj (1828), Jotirao Govindrao Phule and his Satya Shodhaka Sabha (1873), Swami Dayanand Saraswati and his Arya Samaj (1875), Dr. Atma Ram Pandurang and Mahavdev Govind Ranade and their Prarthana Samaj (1876), Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his Aligarh Movement (1880s), Swami Vivekananda and his Rama Krishna Mission (1897), and Narayana Guru and his SNDP Yogam (1903).

The different movements in different ways and in different regions fought against vices and evils like bigotry, superstition, quarrels and fights in the name of religious differences, priestcraft, ritualism, polygamy, caste discrimination, untouchability, *purdah* system, *sati*, child marriage, social inequalities, low position of women in society and religion, prohibition of remarriage of widows, subordination of women, illiteracy, and neglect of education of girls – evils and vices deeply embedded in people's psyche and woven into the social fabric. Many of the reformers were also humanists who appealed to human reason, underlined the unity of all religions, and asked for truth, goodness and compassion in human conduct.

In this article, I seek to profile two socio-religious movements and also highlight the spirituality they embody – the *Sree Narayana Movement* from the south and the *Sant Nirankari Mission* from the north. These movements had their origin towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. Sree Narayana Movement

The 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed a new awakening among the depressed communities across India. An egalitarian consciousness arose and grew in strength, which led the subaltern communities to assert their equal rights in society against caste-based exploitation. They desired and attempted to bring in social and religious



changes transgressing the limits and restrictions imposed on them by the brahmanical order. Kerala too was home to many such movements and struggles for the liberation of the caste-oppressed people. The best known among these liberation movements in Kerala is the Sree Narayana movement.

The philosopher-saint Sree Narayana Guru was the greatest and best-known social reformer of Kerala. He is also recognised as a great religious figure of Kerala. His social reform movement was a practical application of the advaitic view of reality, which he perceived in his unique way. The socio-religious revolution he launched went a long way in liberating the depressed people of Kerala, especially his own Ezhava community, from the caste-generated economic disabilities and social indignities. However, his were not the first struggles of the Ezhavas for civil and religious rights. In 1800, a group of Ezhavas had tried to enter the Vaikom Temple claiming equal rights with the *savarna* Hindus (caste Hindus). The first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also had witnessed the breast-cloth struggles of the Ezhavas asserting the rights of their women to wear blouses like the *savarna* Hindu women.

### *2.1. The Emergence of Sree Narayana Guru*

Swami Vivekananda gave to the 19<sup>th</sup> century society of Kerala the notorious epithet of “a lunatic asylum” because of the worst type of caste practices prevalent then. Braj Ranjan Mani sums up the condition of the Ezhavas – the largest and the ‘highest’ community among the ‘untouchables’ of Kerala into which Sree Narayana Guru was born in c. 1855<sup>1</sup> – at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the following words:

They were not allowed to use tanks and wells, or roads and bridges that ran near upper caste homes and temples. They were not allowed to wear footwear or carry an umbrella. Their women were not permitted to use any upper garments to cover their breasts. Forced to render free services to the higher castes, they were denied admission to public schools, and were kept away from administrative services. The prevailing idea among the dominant castes ... was that the lowly Ezhavas should confine themselves

<sup>1</sup> There is no unanimity on the birth year of the Guru. Three years are suggested: 1954, 1955 and 1956.

to their traditional occupations like farming, toddy-tapping, and weaving.<sup>2</sup>

It was into such a decadent society that Sree Narayana Guru was born in Chempazhamthy near Thiruvananthapuram.

Sree Narayana Guru had the opportunity to learn Sanskrit and study Hindu religious texts from a very young age. As a young man and for several years, he moved from place to place as a wandering ascetic or sannyasin, which gave him a firsthand experience of the misery, deprivation, hardship and humiliation in which the depressed classes in Kerala, including his own Ezhava community, lived their daily lives. He also had a life-transforming experience of enlightenment, which eventually converted him into an ascetic-crusader for a more humane and more egalitarian social order.

The first major breakthrough in his mission to free the society from the inhuman caste system was his consecration of a Siva temple in Aruvippuram in 1888 in the festival night of Mahāśivarātri. There were about 75 Ezhava families in Aruvippuram. They had no access to the temples, which were all controlled by caste Hindus. The Guru decided that the solution would be to consecrate a temple for the Ezhavas where they could freely worship the deity. The guru stepped into the river flowing by and came out with a śivalinga-shaped stone and in the pre-dawn hours erected it over a rocky platform, which had been already prepared by the people. This was a serious violation of law and tradition which reserved the right to install idols, especially of higher deities like Shiva, exclusively to the Brahmins. The opponents, who included both caste Hindus and people of his own Ezhava community, were silenced by his remark that he consecrated an Ezhava Shiva.

The Aruvippuram episode was a historic step which gave a strong message against the entrenched tenets of *chaturvarnya* and *varnashramadharma*. M.K. Kumaran looks at this as the event that inaugurated the Renaissance movement in Kerala.<sup>3</sup> With it, the Guru, a

<sup>2</sup> Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2005, p. 300.

<sup>3</sup> See Vijayalayan Jayakumar, *Sree Narayana Guru: A Critical Study*. Translated by K. Sadanandan. New Delhi: D.K. Print World, 1999, p. 62.

young man in the mid-thirties, emerged as the undisputed and most revered leader of the Ezhavas, while also commanding the respect of other groups, including many caste Hindus.

### **2.2.A Relentless Karma Yogi**

The Guru did not stop with one temple at Aruvippuram but in the next several years established a chain of temples across the length and breadth of Kerala which were open to all, irrespective of caste distinctions. The Guru appointed men selected from the lower castes to officiate as pujaris in his temples. He trained them in Sanskrit and temple rituals. The last temple which the Guru set up was at Kalavankode in Chertallai. He did not set up any idol in the temple; a mirror with the syllable 'aum' etched on it took the place of the idol. The Guru wanted to convey that God-realization is through self-realization.

The people of Kerala saw Sree Narayana Guru as a Karma Yogi who worked untiringly to realize his egalitarian and caste-free social vision. He fought the caste-based structuring of society intellectually, culturally, religiously and through organized resistance. He wanted a society free from caste practices and based on equality, fraternity, justice and liberty. He sought to debrahmanise Hinduism to free the subalterns from the exploitative brahmanical control of their faith and religious worship. The Guru sought to promote inter-marriage and inter-dining between castes as a strategy against caste-based discriminations. Presiding over the annual convention of the All Kerala Association of Brotherhood (the *Sahodara Sangham*, which he inspired) at the Aluva Advaita Ashram in 1921, he said: "Whatever may be the differences in man's creeds, dress, language, etc. ... because they are all men belonging to the same caste, there is no harm in inter-marriage and inter-dining."<sup>4</sup>

He lamented there were not many in his community with higher education. "Educate in order to be free and organize in order to be strong" was his message to his community. In his addresses to them, he insisted on cleanliness, truthfulness, hard work and discipline. He established schools, libraries, and small industrial units. He gave many talks and wrote profusely on religion and also on social issues. His writings are in

<sup>4</sup> Cited in George Karakunnel, *Advaita and Liberation*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1997, p. 60.



Malayalam, Tamil and Sanskrit. He laboured for the social emancipation of women, especially through education. His words and actions had tremendous impact on the thought-world of the people of Kerala. Many people attached themselves to the Guru and became his disciples and collaborators in his work which took the form of a social movement.

### **2.3. The SNDP Movement**

On 15 May 1903, the disciples of the Guru established the SNDP Yogam (*Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam*, which literally means an association for the protection of the dharma of Sree Narayana) with the Guru as the lifetime President. The aim of the Yogam was to propagate the ideals of the Guru and to work for the emancipation and empowerment of the depressed classes by means of mass education, vocational training, public action, etc. The Guru hoped that the Yogam would be able to work towards a radical reconstruction of society which would free it from the indignity of caste. For years, the Yogam continued to be in the forefront of the struggles of the depressed communities of Kerala against the caste system. Through the Yogam, the Ezhava community itself became a significant agent of social transformation in Kerala.

The long-drawn collective struggles of the Ezhavas led by the Yogam for the educational rights of the depressed classes bore fruit in the course of time and inspired many other communities to launch their struggles for similar causes. In later years, the Guru was dissatisfied with the ways of the Yogam as it tended to deviate from his ideals and many of the functionaries were moved by the lure of money and power. In spite of such human failings that beleaguered it, in the subsequent decades, the Yogam became a powerful social organisation of the Ezhava community for its socio-economic and political empowerment and advancement. It also had a cascading effect on other subaltern communities in Kerala as it inspired similar organisations and movements among them. It must be admitted that the SNDP movement has played a major role over the years in the social reconstruction of Kerala and in alleviating the caste-based discriminatory and perverse practices.

### **2.4. Guru's Mission in the Last Years**

In 1924, the Guru organised in Aluva a historic two-day "Conference of All Religions" (after the Chicago Parliament of Religions) where he

gave his famous message of religious harmony. The words “Not to argue and win, but to know and to be known” prominently displayed at the entrance of the conference pandal at the bidding of the Guru explained the purpose of the conference. At the Conference, he declared: “As it has been established by the speeches held in this great concourse of religious leaders that the prime goal of all religions is the same and that it is unwise of the followers of different religions to quarrel among themselves over matters of religion.”<sup>5</sup> As already mentioned, the Guru felt that the functionaries of the Yogam, his instrument for social reconstruction, deviated from his ideals. He was disenchanted with it and increasingly distanced himself from its activities. In 1928, he founded another organisation to disseminate his message of one humanity – the *Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham* (SNDS), an order of sannyasins. The Guru passed away on 20 September 1928 at Śivagiri Mutt in Varkala. The death of the Guru does not mean end of the Movement. His mission continues through the institutions and organizations he set up or inspired.

### 2.5. Spirituality of Sree Narayana Movement

The principal thrust of Sree Narayana Movement spearheaded by Sree Narayana Guru and the organisations inspired by him was the creation of a more egalitarian society through the abolition of caste discriminations. It was a subaltern movement for a radical reorganization of society based on the democratic and humanistic values of equality, justice, fraternity, and liberty. Equality meant equal dignity, status and rights to all citizens and communities.

The Sree Narayana Movement is essentially a subaltern social movement which seeks to reform society and also religion. The religious character is seen in its strategies and also in the inspiration and *advaitic* vision of the Guru underlying it. While commenting on the Movement, particularly on the consecration of temples and installation of deities by the Guru, P.S. Velayudhan points to its religious underpinning:

It was both a religious and social revolution. Sree Narayana was a practical *advaitin* who sought to restate *advaita* based on equality and fraternity and apply it to the practical conditions

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Vijayalayam Jayakumar, *Sree Narayana Guru*, p. 76.

of the Hindu society in Kerala for then uplift of the down-trodden. He was the apostle of a universal religion and preached that the essence of all religions is the same – the good of mankind.<sup>6</sup>

Sree Narayana Guru believed in the essential oneness of all religions. He embodied in a very special way the cause of harmony and peace between religions. His message of religious harmony which respects the value and rights of every religion is particularly relevant today in the evolving context of increasing intolerance and violence in the name of religion.

The Guru often looked at religion from a humanistic perspective. His humanistic spiritual vision relativised religion and sees it as an instrument of service to the promotion of the humanum. The Guru envisaged his temples not merely as places of worship but instruments for the uplift of the down-trodden masses and thus as agents of wide-ranging social transformation. Ranjan Mani writes:

The temples Narayana Guru established were harbingers of social change as the officiating priests in all these temples were considered impure in the varna hierarchies. More important he visualised these temples as centres of constructive activity and educational opportunities for the deprived people. Guru was particular that every temple should have gardens around it, there should be schools as well as vocational and technical centres too as ancillary to these temples. The money received as offerings should be utilised for the greater public good promoting the cause of mass education.<sup>7</sup>

On several occasions, he insisted “that the temple buildings and premises must be used as schools, libraries, meeting halls, or even weaving sheds.”<sup>8</sup> A famous saying of the Guru is very illuminating: “Whatever the religion, it is enough if the human being becomes better.” He sought to

<sup>6</sup> P.S. Velayudhan, “Social and Religious Movements in Kerala in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Social and Religious Reform Movements in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, edited by S.P. Sen. Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1979, p. 389.

<sup>7</sup> Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History*, pp. 302-303.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

promote ethical and social values from the precincts of his temples. When he erected a temple in Murukkumpuzha in 1922, thirty-four years after he established his first temple in Aruvippuram, in the place of the deity he installed a granite stone with the four virtues of “*satyam, dharmam, daya* and *shanty*” (truth, righteousness, compassion and peace) engraved on it. According to him, these virtues must be worshipped and practised in the day to day life, at personal and social levels.

In his *advaitic* vision, all human beings are equal. It was his firm belief that all human beings form one fraternity. He got this principle of universal brotherhood transcending caste and religion engraved at the memorial temple erected near the site of his first temple at Aruvippuram:

Without the difference of castes/ Without the rivalry of creeds  
All alike as brothers live here/ Such ideal place is this.<sup>9</sup>

He wanted to transform the lunatic asylum of Kerala into an ideal non-hierarchical society free of caste where all would live as brothers and sisters with equal dignity and respect. The caste is a negation of human fraternity. For the Guru, there is only one humanity and the caste-based segregations and exploitation are crimes against the fundamental truth of humanity. Therefore, he gave this instruction to his followers and to all: “Ask not, speak not, think not caste.” He has encapsulated his ideal of equality and unity of humankind in a very insightful phrase: “One caste, one religion, one God for humankind.” This he wrote in a notice at the entrance of the Advaita Ashram, a monastic mutt which he established in Aluva in 1913. This is perhaps the most-quoted and best-known ‘wisdom saying’ from the Guru.

The Guru, as already mentioned, was a karma yogi. His spirituality emphasises action – action at the individual level and organised collective action – oriented towards the good of the self, good of the other and good of society at large. To bring about the social transformation he envisioned, the Guru sent out trusted and committed disciples well-versed in his ideals to go around and propagate his message. They were to instruct people about religious reforms, good conduct and ethical living,

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<sup>9</sup> Cited in George Karakunnel, *Advaita and Liberation*. p. 60.



value of education for personal progress and progress of community, importance of hard work and discipline, etc.

The Guru's message that all human beings are brothers and sisters enjoins upon us the duty to love and serve one another. The Guru adds a theological and religious dimension to it: "God is present in every human being and so to worship God is to serve humankind." A couplet from the Guru may roughly be translated like this: "Whatever one does for one's own well-being must also contribute to the well-being of others." It may very well be said that the Guru's religion is very much humanistic. We need to serve others and look for their well-being in all that we do. The Guru wants us to shun all kinds of self-seeking in our every pursuit.

We shall now move on to the second socio-religious movement of our study: the Sant Nirankari Mission which took birth in 1929 in Peshawar, now in Pakistan, a year after Sree Narayana Guru passed away in Kerala.

### **3. Sant Nirankari Mission**

The readers may not be familiar with the spiritual movement called Sant Nirankari Mission, though it has hundreds of thousands of followers. The followers are mostly in the northern states of India. However, it has also followers in the southern states as well as in several countries of Europe and America. The Mission has spread everywhere through movement of people across states and continents and also by the work of missionary devotees. It was only recently that I found out that the Mission has a large number of followers in Kerala too. Very recently, during 6-7 July 2014 the Mission successfully organized a Sant Nirankari Samagam (Assembly) and a Bal Samagam (Children's Assembly) at its Satsang Bhawan in Kochi. Both the assemblies drew devotees and youth from all over Kerala. The outreach of the Mission extends to many countries now. It claims to have about 750 centres all over the world – about 670 in India alone and the rest mostly in Europe and America.

The Sant Nirankari movement must be distinguished from the Nirankari movement founded by Baba Dayal (1783-1855) in the mid-nineteenth century in W. Punjab (now in Pakistan) but is now headquartered in Chandigarh. In his early years, Baba Buta Singh Ji, the first head of the Sant Nirankari movement, was associated with the Nirankari movement.

### 3.1. *Origin and Growth of the Mission*

The Mission took birth in Peshawar in Pakistan in 1929 and the founder is Sadguru Baba Buta Singh Ji (1873-1943). Starting with Buta Singh Ji, every successive head of the Mission has been referred to using the formal title of Sadguru Baba, meaning the Revered True Master or Sant Nirankari Baba. There has been so far a succession of four Sadgurus: Buta Singh Ji (1929-1943), Avtar Singh Ji (1943-1969), Gurbachan Singh Ji (1969-1980), and the present incumbent Hardev Singh Ji (1980- ). The first Sadguru was childless and starting with the second Sadguru, the office has been transferred from the father to the son.

The founder Buta Singh Ji was born in 1873 in a village called Hadwal in the district of Kamalpur, now in Pakistan. Once while singing kirtans at a gurdwara in Rawalpindi, he was accosted by certain Baba Kahan Singh Ji whom he followed to his house. Eventually Baba Karan Singh revealed to him the true knowledge of the Nirankari Prabhu (the Formless Lord) whom he had been worshipping all these years as a pious Sikh. He 'saw' the limitless form of the all-pervading and almighty formless God. This happened in 1914. He was forbidden by Kahan Singh Ji to transmit the divine knowledge received because of the repercussions it would bring upon him from the traditionalists. He kept the knowledge within himself for 15 years and then in 1929, with the permission of Kahan Singh Ji, began to seek out devotees of the Lord in Peshawar. This is the beginning of what came to be called the Nirankari Mission (the Mission of the formless One). He got many followers. His mission of spreading the true knowledge of the formless One continued for 14 years until he, before his death, handed over the task to a faithful and devout missionary Avtar Singh Ji. Avtar Singh Ji became the second head of the Mission – Sadguru Baba or Sant Nirankari Baba – at the death of Buta Singh Ji in 1943.

The Mission continued to grow and congregations of followers (*Sant Nirankari Sangats*) were established in different towns. Then came the partition of India and the formation of Pakistan as a separate state. Most of the Sant Nirankaris left Pakistan and settled in different towns in India. Avtar Singh Ji himself and many followers settled in Delhi. Delhi has since become the headquarters of the Mission. The Sant Nirankari Mandal was established in 1948 as a management committee

to oversee all the affairs of the Mission. The same year saw the beginning of the Annual Nirankari Sant Samagam (Assembly) in Delhi. The Sant Samagam is an occasion for the Mission's devotees from all over the world to gather together to get a *darshan* (vision) of the Sadguru Baba, to listen to his *amrit vachan* (immortal words) and to meet among themselves. Several lakhs of devotees come together in the Sant Samagam which is held in Nirankari Colony, Delhi in October/November every year for a few days.

The immortal message of Avtar Singh Ji is available in the poems of "*Sampuran Avtar Bani*" (1965). Its 376 hymns teaches about the attributes of the formless God, the important role of the Sadguru in God-realization, meaning and purpose of human life, pure living, lifestyle of the Sant Nirankaris, the five principles of the Mission, true religion, etc. The *Sampooran Avtar Bani*, originally in Punjabi, is now translated into English and many Indian languages: Hindi, Urdu, Sindhi, Marathi, Gujarat, Bengali, Tamil and Telugu. It is not a 'holy religious' book to be revered and worshipped. It witnesses to the way of life expected of Sant Nirankaris; it is read in order to be put into practice in day to-day living. It is a guide for happy and pure living according to the Sant Nirankari way.

Before his death in 1969, Avtar Singh Ji established his son Gurbachan Singh as his successor. Baba Gurbachan Singh Ji successfully continued the work of the Mission until his assassination at the hands of religious fanatics in 1980. The reins of the Mission then passed onto his young son of 26 years, Hardev Singh Ji, the current head of the Mission. Most of the institutional structures of the Mission – Nirankari Sant Sangats, Sant Nirankari Mandal, Headquarters at Sant Nirankari Colony in Delhi, annual Nirankari Sant Samagams in Delhi, publication division, *Sampooran Avtar Bani* – were put in place during the period of Avtar Singh Ji. His successors strengthened and expanded them further. The Mission has appointed *pracharaks* (missionaries) to spread its message everywhere. It has a large number of volunteers, both men and women, who are organized in a network of volunteer groups called Sewa Dal Units in different towns. The Mission has also established Sant Nirankari Satsang Bhawans in many big towns where the devotees gather for kirtans and discourses.

### 3.2. *The Spirituality of the Sant Nirankari Movement*

According to the Sant Nirankari worldview, as is the case with most religious worldviews, the purpose or goal of human life is to realize God. The realization of God leads to the realization of the Self as merged into the Supreme Reality. The Self is thus unreal or, in other words, real only in the Supreme Being, like the spark and the Flame or as the drop whose journey comes to an end when it is immersed in the Ocean. God-realization and the simultaneous Self-realization purify human life of all the evil elements and the human being becomes righteous, pure and noble. Hatred and discord give way to love and peacefulness. Free from all illusions that torment it, life is divinized.

The formless (nirankar) and unchanging God is omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient and eternal. Without the benign blessing of the living True Master, the Sadguru, whose mind grasps what is even beyond the five senses, no one can realize God. The Sadguru communicates the knowledge of God instantly and the devotee realizes God and the Self. This leads one to the state of *sahaj* in which one remains united with God and experiences within oneself deep and unbroken joy, peace, contentment and equanimity. The person is filled with gratitude to God for all the blessings of life. The realized person radiates and communicates peace and serenity to all else and is not unduly disturbed or agitated by any experience that comes by. The Sant Nirankaris must live in peace with all. Baba Gurbachan Singh teaches: "No one is a stranger, and no one is our enemy. We live happily with everybody."<sup>10</sup>

God-knowledge leads to a sense of universal brotherhood beyond distinction of caste and creed, because every human being is seen to be in the continuum of the same Supreme Being. This enlightening experience of universal brotherhood is behind all the humanitarian efforts of the Mission and its followers. The Mission does not make distinctions of high and low, rich and poor. Baba Gurbachan Singh teaches: "Let us never think about anybody as inferior to us; we should hold everyone in esteem."<sup>11</sup> For the Sant Nirankaris, the world is one family, which is the

<sup>10</sup> Kishan Lal, *The Mission and the Missionaries*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Delhi: Sant Nirankari Mandal, 2009, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 30



ancient Indian teaching of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. All have the same divine origin and all are children of the same supreme Father.

One does not attain salvation by good works. Good works are needed but salvation requires the benign grace of the Sadguru and truthful living according to his teaching. When one fulfils one's responsibility, the action must be seen as dedicated to God. Divine knowledge given by the Sadguru does not save one from the *sansaric* bondage; it removes ignorance and introduces the aspirant to the Eternal Truth and to truthful living. As Baba Hardev Singh says, "Mere God-knowledge is not enough. It should be supported by practical living."<sup>12</sup> One common way in which the Mission serves society is through organised blood donation. The Mission promotes it among the followers everywhere. The centres everywhere regularly organise blood donation camps.

How does the Mission understand devotion to God? The purpose of devotion is not to seek God-knowledge. The devotee has already realized God. This God-knowledge is the beginning of devotion, which is seen as an expression of gratitude. It is manifested in three settings – in *satsang*, *sewa* and *sumiran*, that is, company of the saints, service and remembrance. Rituals are relativised in this understanding of devotion. *Satsang* is about staying in the company of saints, that is, the enlightened ones which means the fellow Sant Nirankaris; *sewa* means altruistic and voluntary service to humanity; and *sumiran* signifies living consciously in the awareness of the formless God, which is the prayer of the devotees. *Satsang*, *sewa* and *sumiran* come spontaneously to the realized soul.<sup>13</sup>

The Mission is not intended to be a new religion. It respects all religions and their sacred scriptures and believes that all of them are capable of making the followers noble human beings. According to Baba Gurbachan Singh, "Religion does not teach jealousy or hatred, rather it teaches love, compassion and fellow feeling."<sup>14</sup> The Mission enjoins upon all its followers to show the greatest respect to the prophets, messengers, teachers, seers, and gurus of all religions. Their teachings belong to all humanity. The Sadgurus have prescribed that the names of the prophets

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Kishan Lal, *The Mission and the Missionaries*, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Amrik Singh, *The Unique Mission*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Delhi: Sant Nirankari Mandal, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Krishan Lal, *The Mission and Missionaries*, p. 24.

and holy books of all religions be mentioned with respect. The Sadguru only reveals and communicates to the aspirants the divine knowledge (*brahma-gian*) by which they realize God. The Mission therefore does not 'convert' followers of other religions. A follower of the Mission may belong to any religion but should shun sectarianism. The Mission upholds freedom of thought, conscience and belief. It seeks to promote peace, non-violence, communal harmony, mutual understanding, and fellow-feeling between individuals and among communities.

The attitude of the Sant Nirankaris to wealth is cautiously positive. If one considers material wealth and wellbeing as the goal of life, it will only lead to ruin. Wealth acquired through dishonest means makes one a slave and brings misery. If earned by righteous means and used for serving the needy, it leads to blessedness. Therefore, depending on how it is earned and how it is used, wealth can become a blessing or a curse. Our possessions are not ours but are God's assets. All earthly goods are God's making and so belong to God alone. Our life on earth is at God's pleasure. This awareness annihilates pride and arrogance and leads one to humility, gratitude and surrender to God.

The Sant Nirankaris make five pledges and they are expected to live by them. The five pledges are the following:

- i) The devotees shall consider all worldly possessions – of body, mind and wealth – as belonging to the formless God. They shall not take pride in the worldly possessions. They shall use them considering them be God's own possession.
- ii) The devotees shall not take pride in their particular caste, creed and colour and shall not practise any kind of discrimination based on caste, creed and colour. All human beings are created by God and so must be loved as such.
- iii) The devotees shall not hate or criticize others because of their particular eating and dressing habits.
- iv) The devotees shall not take the path of ascetics or recluses and become burdensome parasites on others. Their path is that of the householder and they shall exhibit their true devotion in fulfilling their responsibilities as householders.

- v) The devotees shall not deviate from the divine knowledge received through the Sadguru and shall not divulge it to anyone without the permission of the Sadguru.<sup>15</sup>

The fifth pledge cautions against becoming overzealous and proud in missionary enterprises. One needs to be humble and wait for the bidding of the Sadguru. Without his permission the devotees may not reveal to anyone the divine knowledge received by his grace. One must be found fit and worthy before enterprising on the missionary task.

The first four pledges along with the devotional triad of *satsang*, *sewa* and *sumiran* more or less sum up the spirituality of the Mission.

#### 4. Conclusion

A quick look at the spiritualities of the two movements will point to many areas of convergence despite their many differences and their varying socio-religious and historical contexts. The convergences are not only in their response to the social situation but also in their worldviews. We may point out some similarities: belief in the equality of all because all have the same divine origin, negation of caste and desire for a caste-free society, belief in universal fraternity, respect for all religions (*sarvadharmasambhav*) and the spirit of harmony, opposition to priestcraft, understanding that religion must ennoble human beings and thus serve the social cause, belief in non-violence, human rights, freedom of conscience, commitment to social reform, etc. Many of these elements of convergence are in consonance with contemporary perspectives of Christian spirituality. An exploration in this direction is beyond the scope of this article. However, it may be mentioned in passing that a Christian may legitimately infer the presence and dynamism of God's Spirit in movements like the ones we have examined.

Vidyajyoti College of Theology  
Delhi-110 054

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Sant Nirankari Mandal, *Sant Nirankari Mission: An Introduction*. Delhi: Sant Nirankari Mandal, n.d., pp. 9-10.

# Harmony of Religions and Service to Humanity: Reflections on the Twin Mission of Sri Ramakrishna Movement

**Vincent Sekhar**

Drawing insights from Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, the article focuses on the Ramakrishna Math and Mission of harmony of religions and service to the poor and the downtrodden. The multi-pronged activities of the mission exemplify the spiritual perspectives of its founders. *Dr. Vincent Sekhar <[\\_sekhar\\_sj\\_2010@gmail.com](mailto:_sekhar_sj_2010@gmail.com)>* is the Executive director and Dean of Research of IDCR, Chennai. He is also the Secretary for the Jesuit Mission of Interreligious Dialogue in South Asian Jesuit Assistancy. His latest publication is *Religions, Ecology and Environment - Sacred texts that shape perspectives* (Claretian Publications, Bangalore, August 2013)

In February 2000, the Ramakrishna Math at Mylapore, Chennai, inaugurated the Universal Temple and, as the name suggests, the hall was open for all, irrespective of caste and creed, to come and sit for meditation or mind relaxation. As a fast growing movement and organization, Ramakrishna Math is engaged in instilling the minds of the young and the old with the inspiring attitude, words and deeds of its Founder Sri Ramakrishna and his immediate dynamic disciple Swami Vivekananda. Its catholic outlook on life and the environment, the friendly ways and approaches to humanity have made life more meaningful and purposeful and this has gripped the minds and hearts of millions who visualize a new way of being and acting. The paper examines how the spiritual experiences of the founding Fathers Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda get translated into the twin mission of the movement, namely, harmony of religions and service to humanity.



## Foundational Experience

The newly inaugurated *Ramakrishna Mission* on May 1, 1897, had among its other objectives, to help others to put those truths into practice experienced and lived by Sri Ramakrishna and also to establish a fellowship among the followers of different religions, knowing them all to be so many forms only of one undying Eternal Religion.

Its methods of action included an introduction and spread among the people in general Vedantic and other religious ideas in the way in which they were elucidated in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. Whosoever welcomed those who sympathized or was willing to cooperate with the above-mentioned aims and objects of the Association, was eligible for membership.<sup>1</sup>

The backbone of the starting of the Organization was none other than Swami Vivekananda who had the prodigious capacity not only for grasping the implications of the new message given by his spiritual mentor Sri Ramakrishna but also for translating them into action. His master's core experience of the realization of God, the basic oneness of all religions, the Advaita vision of reality and the service to all creatures in the universe had influenced Swami Vivekananda's thoughts and vision.

Swami Vivekananda declared that he had come to prove the great Vedanta ideal in practical life and to herald it before the workaday world and society: "The lion-roar of Advaita must resound in every hearth and home, in meadows and grooves, over hills and plains."<sup>2</sup> He believed in the basic oneness of existence seen through different constitutions such as earth, heavens, gods, hell, ghosts, men, etc.<sup>3</sup> and advocated strongly the eternal sameness or homogeneity beyond all differentiation and the unity of all personalities. Vedanta meant that all power, glory and purity of the divine were already within the soul, within each creature in the universe.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Swami Gambhirananda, *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Advaita Ashrama*, Calcutta, 1957, pp. 119-20

<sup>2</sup> *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (CW)*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Vol. vii (Eleventh Reprint, January 1992), p 162

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* vol. iii (Fifteenth Reprint, May 1991), p 24

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* vol. iii (Fifteenth Reprint, May 1991), pp. 284, 576-77

The logical sequence was the experience 'that you are a part of me, and I of you...in his good consists my good'.<sup>5</sup> His guru Sri Ramakrishna realized the centrality of this doctrine while he was propounding the tenets of Vaishnavism, on compassion for all creatures and service to them as manifestations of God. He felt that such realization of divinity in humanity left no room for egotism...Service of man, knowing him to be the manifestation of God, purified the heart, and such an aspirant quickly realized himself as part and parcel of God.<sup>6</sup>

Another unique message of Sri Ramakrishna, as a result of his experiments with various religious disciplines (devotional experiences of Mother Kali, Rama, his occult Tantric practices, mystic experience of God as the child Rama, his Vedantic pursuits, his experiences of the divine in the pale outside of Hinduism such as the Buddha, the Christ, the name of Allah and so on), was the old Vedic assertion that the sages have given many names to that which is essentially one: "They call him Indra, Mitra, VaruGa, Agni, and he is heavenly nobly-winged Garutmân. To what is One, sages give many a title they call it Agni, Yama, Mâtariúvan."<sup>7</sup> Because of the frequent repetition of this statement, '*Many paths One goal*' seemed to be official stance of the Mission approach to religious pluralism.

This dictum was explained through various imageries and examples: the illustration of the travel<sup>8</sup> to Dakshineshvar by carriage, by road, by steamer or on foot, each one choosing the way according to one's convenience and taste, nevertheless reaching the same destination; or the image of the lila,<sup>9</sup> Brahman as Kali, the Adyasakti, as Krishna etc.; or the illustration of music,<sup>10</sup> the notes are the same but the melodies from these notes are different; or the illustration of the rooftop,<sup>11</sup> one can reach the rooftop by means of stone stairs, or by bamboo steps or

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* vol. vi (Twelfth Reprint, May 1991), pp. 5-6

<sup>6</sup> Swami Gambhirananda, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 24-25

<sup>7</sup> Ralph T.H. Griffiths, Translator, *The Rig Veda*, 1896: 1.164.46 (Internet source) <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv01164.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, R. K. Math, Madras, 1969, p 1008

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p 1010

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p 1023.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p 39

by a rope; or the illustration of the reservoir<sup>12</sup> containing the Elixir of Immortality, one may get into the reservoir by jumping into it, or by being pushed into it from behind, or by slowly walking down the steps. The effect is one and the same.

Sri Ramakrishna had a staunch belief that each one has to approach God in his/her own way and it was God who had Himself provided different forms of worship and had arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stage of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Whatever be the path followed by the believer if his/her devotion was sincere and earnest, his/her attitude was devoid of all attachments and his/her vision embraced the whole universe as God he/she would reach the goal.

Following his master, *Swami Vivekananda* asserted that unity was the object of all religions. His analysis of religion showed that man did not travel from fallacy to truth but from a lower truth to a higher one.<sup>14</sup> Each of us was moving towards Him (the Centre) along one of the radii and where all radii met, all differences ceased but until then the differences had to be.<sup>15</sup> Swami Vivekananda did dream of a '*Universal Religion*' not located in place or time, which would be infinite like the God it would preach, shining upon the followers of all religions, sinners and saints alike. It would be the religion, which would have no place for persecution or intolerance..., which would recognize divinity in every man and woman.<sup>16</sup> Hence Swami Vivekananda advocated the sisterhood and brotherhood of all religious followers wanting them all to have in each one the spirituality of the Hindus, the mercifulness of the Buddhists, the activity of the Christians, the brotherhood of the Mohammedans<sup>17</sup> and made this the prime objective of his Math: *Universal Harmony*.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, R. K. Math, Madras, 1985, vol. i p 467

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* ed.1969, p 5

<sup>14</sup> *CW* vol. vii (Eleventh Reprint, January 1992), p 425

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* vol. ii (Sixteenth Impression, December 1991), pp. 384-85

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* vol. i (Eighteenth Reprint, May 1991), p 19

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* vol. viii (Eighth Reprint, May 1991), pp. 79-80

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* vol. vii (Eleventh Reprint, January 1992), p 115

The whole gamut of experiences of the Master and the immediate Disciple can be comprised in two phrases: *Harmony of Religions and Service to Humanity*. Both were the outcome of the one and the same Advaitic experience of the oneness of God and the universe. They are inseparable, indestructible oneness of life, the oneness of everything.<sup>19</sup> Hence the approach to life, especially to religion would be one of acceptance and not exclusion, not even toleration,<sup>20</sup> of convergence and not divergence,<sup>21</sup> of construction and not destruction.<sup>22</sup> Equal emphasis had been given to both religion and society (humanity) and to this effect the Math and Mission was ready to incorporate institutions, societies or associations having objects wholly or in part similar to any of those of the Association and cooperate with any person or persons in aid of both religion and society. The aims and objects and the *Memorandum of the Association* (Sangha)<sup>23</sup> and the rules and regulations of the Belur Math<sup>24</sup> were testimonies to this.

### **Ramakrishna Movement's approach to religious pluralism**

Ramakrishna Movement's fundamental option for the harmony of religions was based on their *religious/inter-religious experience of Advaita*. Sri Ramakrishna believed that God accepted a sincere believer whatever path he/she chose. With sincerity, earnestness and single-minded devotion one can realize God through all religions. Sri Ramakrishna said to a Vaishnava Goswami, "With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions. The Vaishnavites will realize God, and so will the Saktas, the Vedantins and the Brahmos. The Mussalman and the Christians will realize Him too. All will certainly realize God if they are earnest and sincere."<sup>25</sup> Hence Bhakti or sincere devotion transcends

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* vol. ii (Sixteenth Impression, December 1991), p 153

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* vol. vii (Eleventh Reprint, January 1992), pp. 373-74

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* vol. ii (Sixteenth Impression, December 1991), pp. 384-85

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* vol. ii (Sixteenth Impression, December 1991), p 141

<sup>23</sup> Swami Gambhirananda, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 119-20, 185-86

<sup>24</sup> *CW* vol. v (Fourteenth Reprint, April 1992), p 62

<sup>25</sup> Swami Nikhilananda: *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Trans. from the originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Madras, Fifth Edition, January 1969, p. 124



the question of hierarchy among all religious traditions. While talking (praying) to Mother Kali, Sri Ramakrishna exclaimed, "Mother, everyone says, 'My watch alone is right.' The Christians, the Brahmos, the Hindus, the Mussulmans, all say, 'My religion alone is true.' But, Mother, the fact is that nobody watch is right. Who can truly understand Thee? But if a man prays to Thee with a yearning heart, he can reach Thee, through Thy grace by any path."<sup>26</sup> One finds here a parallel in the words of St. Peter concerning the conversion of the Gentiles: I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him. Later at the Council of Jerusalem<sup>27</sup> he says that God who knows the human heart, testified to them (the Gentiles) by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.<sup>28</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna was more open to such a pluralistic understanding of religions although he did distinguish between paths, their relative merits and demerits in the spiritual journey of a soul. His pluralistic, liberal understanding of religions encompassed a sort of religious freedom, respecting the choice and the diverse expression of any religious discipline.

Both for Sri Ramakrishna, the Master, and the Disciple, Swami Vivekananda, the variant paths were arranged by God Himself to suit individuals at different stages of knowledge: "God Himself has provided different forms of worship. He who is the Lord of the Universe has arranged all these forms to suit different men in different stages of knowledge. "The mother cooks different dishes to suit the stomachs of her different children. Suppose she has five children. If there is a fish to cook, she prepares various dishes from it - pilau, pickled fish, fried fish, and so on - to suit their different tastes and powers of digestion."<sup>29</sup> and all the believers are travelling from lower forms of truth to the higher.<sup>30</sup> What is implicit in Swami Vivekananda's theory is that there is

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 18-19

<sup>27</sup> *The Bible*, RSV Edition, Acts 10:34-35

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* Acts 15:8-9

<sup>29</sup> Swami Nikhilananda: *Op. Cit.*, p 5

<sup>30</sup> CW vol. vii (Eleventh Reprint, January 1992), p 425

a *hierarchy among paths or disciplines* represented by the lower and the higher forms of truth. As one grows in religious consciousness one adopts new forms and drops off the old ones, some forms being more efficacious than others, some useful and some others harmful. This is also confirmed by the response given by Sri Ramakrishna when Swami Vivekananda asked about Tantra as a possible spiritual discipline: It is extremely difficult to practice spiritual discipline looking on woman as one's mistress; to regard oneself as her child is a very pure attitude.<sup>31</sup>

Swami Vivekananda held that India and Vedic religions were clearly superior to other countries and their traditions. For him the Mukti path was to be found only in India<sup>32</sup> and salvation of Europe depended on a rationalistic religion, and Advaita was the only one that could have any hold on any intellectual people.<sup>33</sup> In several places, Swami Vivekananda made statements on *Advaita as the only Religion*, which agreed with and went beyond modern researches, and which was a sure reason for its appeal to modern scientists so much.<sup>34</sup> As Vedanta had become the religion of the Hindus, any sect wanting to establish its ideas with a firm hold on the people it had to base them on the authority of the Vedanta.<sup>35</sup>

After Swami Vivekananda, some adherents of the Math went to the extent of saying that all paths were only *preparatory* for the real things offered by India and its spirituality. In other words, *Advaita became the Apex* to which all other traditions inclined. In the words of Swami Ghanananda: Advaita regards the followers of all religions, irrespective of caste, creed and colour, as pilgrims, more or less conscious, bound for the Temple of Truth, of which all religions of the world are so many roads... The flight of Sri Ramakrishna's soul from the pinnacle of Advaita to Islam was like the flight of a bird from the highest top of a tree to one of its branches...<sup>36</sup> No other country has furnished the basis of a universal

<sup>31</sup> Swami Nikhilananda, ed. 1969, *Op. Cit.*, p 51

<sup>32</sup> Swami Vivekananda, *Religion of Love*, R. K. Math, Belur, 1927, p 75

<sup>33</sup> *CW* vol. ii (Sixteenth Impression, December 1991), p 139

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* vol. ii (Sixteenth Impression, December 1991), p 138

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* vol. iii (Fifteenth Reprint, May 1991), p 456

<sup>36</sup> Ghanananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and his unique message*, R. K. Vedanta Centre, London, 1970, 3rd ed., p 88

religion which is all-embracing and all-inclusive (as the Advaita)...<sup>37</sup> Swami Ranganathananda maintained that only in India one found a more spiritual and less dogmatic view of religion than elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> Swami Brahmananda affirmed that there were grades of worship, all leading eventually and naturally to non-dualism.<sup>39</sup> Swami Abhedananda used the imagery of the ladder in which Advaita was seen as the top rung for various reasons.<sup>40</sup>

A close reading of these views would suggest to present day scholars and spiritual activists *exclusive tendencies* in the Ramakrishna Mission and Math especially in their approach to various religious traditions. A tricky dogmatism, which concludes that 'my religion alone is superior' and an inclusive theology which says 'you are an Anonymous Hindu' (a reaction to the Christian inclusive approach?) perhaps have come to stay in the mind-set of some inmates in the later Movement. But the experience of individuals going to the Math and Mission do confirm the Movement's continuous hold on a positive, liberal view on religious pluralism.<sup>41</sup>

Understanding religious pluralism is an unending search because of the complexity of issues involved. Especially in India where religion and other dimensions of life are so much inter-woven, understanding the religious culture of the other is a difficult task that demands transcending of human limitations, personal as well as social. The Ramakrishna Math and Mission do reveal a kind of openness to a well-integrated approach to life and persons in the pluri-religious and cultural contexts of India, thanks to Sri Ramakrishna and swami Vivekananda. In the years, there has been a smooth moving away from the static, exclusive trends and travelling towards a dynamic openness to other religious communities.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p 165

<sup>38</sup> Swami Renganathananda, *Science and Religion*, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1978, pp. 15-16

<sup>39</sup> Swami Brahmananda, *Spiritual Teachings*, R. K. Math, Madras, 1933, 2nd ed., pp. 130-131

<sup>40</sup> Swami Abhedananda, *Complete Works*, R. K. Math, Madras, 1924, p 368

<sup>41</sup> R. W. Neufeldt, The response of the Ramakrishna Mission, in *Modern Indian responses to religious Pluralism*, ed. Harold G. Coward, Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1991, p 78

Its social and health concerns have opened up more ways of addressing the people of all faiths or of no faiths.

### *Service to Humanity*

The motto of Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission<sup>42</sup> is *Atmano mokshartham jagad hitaya cha*, “For one’s own salvation, and for the welfare of the world”.

Their Official Website further elaborates on the Motto in the following manner:

1. To spread the idea of the potential divinity of every being and how to manifest it through every action and thought. 2. To spread the idea of harmony of religions based on Sri Ramakrishna’s experience that all religions lead to the realization of the same Reality known by different names in different religions. The Mission honours and reveres the founders of all world religions such as Buddha, Christ and Mohammed. 3. To treat all work as worship, and service to man as service to God. 4. To make all possible attempts to alleviate human suffering by spreading education, rendering medical service, extending help to villagers through rural development centres, etc. 5. To work for the all-round welfare of humanity, especially for the uplift of the poor and the downtrodden. 6. To develop harmonious personalities by the combined practice of Jnana, Bhakti, Yoga and Karma.

Among these, the service to man is seen akin to service to God, and specific attention is to be given to the poor and the downtrodden for their all-round welfare. The term *Daridra Narayana* was coined by Swami Vivekananda to see God in the Poor. In his reply to one of his disciples Sharat Chandra Chakraborty on 3 July 1897, Swami Vivekananda said that when one serves a jiva as a *jiva*, it is *daya* or compassion and when the jiva is served as the *self*, it is *prema* or love. He went on to say, “This notion of man as distinct from God is the cause of bondage. Our principle, therefore, should be love, not compassion. The application of the word compassion even seems to me to be rash and vain. For us, it is not to pity

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<sup>42</sup> Most of the information are collected from <http://www.belurmath.org/> the official website of Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission, Belur, the headquarters of the organization.



but to serve. Ours is not the feeling of compassion but of love, and the feeling of Self in all.”<sup>43</sup>

To the inmates of the Math, service is the Way of life, characterized by selflessness, sacrifice and love. The great ideals of democracy, namely, liberty, fraternity, and equality are to be realized in society through the missionary activities. Freedom will entail freedom from all religious bigotry, intolerance, hatred and superstition, freedom from religious, social and racial prejudices, in a word, freedom of thought and belief. This justly requires a social commitment towards excellence, efficiency and teamwork. These and other values and ideals are exemplified in the various activities of the Math such as education, relief and rehabilitation, health and hygiene, service in rural and tribal areas, women and youth welfare programmes. On one occasion, Swami Vivekananda, in his first experience in a famine-hit area, wrote to Swami Akhandananda: “All the wealth of the world cannot help one little Indian village if the people are not taught to help themselves. Our work should be mainly *educational*, both moral and intellectual.”<sup>44</sup>

### ***Education***

It may come as a surprise that Swami Vivekananda admonished the Brahmins to focus their intelligence and educational skills toward the most needed to be strengthened first. And he understood justice in terms of equity. He said, “Ay, Brahmins, if the Brahmin has more aptitude for learning on the ground of heredity than the Pariah, spend no more money on the Brahmin’s education, but spend all on the Pariah. Give to the weak, for there all the gift is needed. If the Brahmin is born clever, he can educate himself without help. If the others are not born clever, let them have all the teaching and the teachers they want. This is justice and reason as I understand it. Our poor people, these downtrodden masses of India, therefore, require to hear and to know what they really are. Ay, let every man and women and child, without respect of caste or birth, weakness or strength, hear and learn that behind the strong and the weak, behind the high and the low, behind every one, there is that Infinite

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.vedantin.org/the-limits-of-compassion>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.awakeningindia.org/life/Teachings.aspx>

Soul, assuring the infinite possibility and the infinite capacity of all to become great and good.”<sup>45</sup>

True to this spirit, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission undertook the challenge of educating the poor and the Belur Math, the main centre for Ramakrishna mission activities in Kolkata, summarizes their educational work in a long list of 1417 Institutions, 702 Vocational Courses, and 2914 Cultural Units / Programmes.<sup>46</sup> In all these, the socially backward participants form almost one third of the total number of beneficiaries.

### ***Rural Development***

The Math website<sup>47</sup> indicates that Rural and tribal welfare work are undertaken in three different ways: 1. through centres in rural and tribal areas, 2. through urban centres, which take up projects in rural and tribal areas, and 3. through their educational and medical institutions in semi-urban areas, where the beneficiaries are mainly the rural people. In one year, from April 2012 to March 2013, the math and Mission has spent a sum of Rs. 41.26 crore for the people in the rural and tribal areas. The developmental work includes programmes like digging of wells and ponds, installing tube-wells, water filters, water harvesting, household toilets, drainage systems, sterilization programme, agriculture and irrigation, wasteland development, animal resource development like establishing veterinary clinics, etc.

The inmates conduct a number of awareness programmes on health and hygiene, immunization, etc. and do a number of construction and repair works. Again in all these, it is the socially backward people who had been the main beneficiaries (almost two third: 4,35,266 beneficiaries out of 6,30,820) among others.<sup>48</sup> There are also other activities like solid waste management, liquid waste management, re-cycling, social forestry, alternate source of energy like solar energy units and bio-gas plants.

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<sup>45</sup> Swami Vivekananda: The Mission of the Vedanta, Quoted in *Selections from the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Thirteenth Impression, 1995, p. 208

<sup>46</sup> From the major website of Belur Math Educational Work: <http://www.belurmath.org/activities.htm#Educational>

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* Service in Rural and tribal Areas: <http://www.belurmath.org/activities.htm#Tribal>

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Medical Services*

Medical services include running of hospitals and dispensaries (Allopathic, Homeopathic, and Ayurvedic medicine), mobile medical camps such as general medical camps and eye camps, old-age homes, running of nurses' training institutions and medical research institutes. In the year 2012-13, over 1.9 million people have benefitted by the Math's medical services.<sup>49</sup>

Among the many services the Math undertakes, special mention is to be made on leprosy rehabilitation. Swami Vivekananda mentions about God coming in the shape of the lunatic and the leprosy afflicted, saying that caring such people should be the privilege in the Math's life: "I should see God in the poor and it is for my salvation that I go and worship them. The poor and the miserable are for our salvation, so that we may serve the Lord, coming in the shape of the distressed, coming in the shape of lunatic, the Leprosy Afflicted person. Bold are my words and let me repeat that it is the greatest privilege in our lives that we are allowed to serve the lord in all these shape."<sup>50</sup>

The Math provides financial and psychological support to the leprosy afflicted people to lead a normal life with the help of several self-help groups. In April 2012, the record says that over 1200 leprosy patients had been rehabilitated through Cataract surgery, getting them pensions, issuing free bus pass, house allotment, self-employment, little entertainments, etc.<sup>51</sup> The Vivekananda Youth Forum (VYF) regularly lends its counseling services, free distribution of books and back issues of journals and magazines, supply diet food to the patients in Royapettah Government Hospital, Chennai.

### *R       Services*

Whenever the nation faced with calamities and natural disaster, the services of Sri Ramakrishna Math had come ready. Sri Ramakrishna

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* —

<sup>50</sup> From the main website of Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai. It is the first branch center of the Ramakrishna Order in Southern India. It was started in the year 1897 by Swami Ramakrishnananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. This is the opening statement of Swami Vivekananda on the Math's Medical Services: <http://www.chennaiamath.org/activities/medical>

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.chennaiamath.org/activities/medical/leprosy-rehabilitation>

once said, “If God can be worshipped in an *imagē*, can He not be worshipped in a living person?”<sup>52</sup> The inmates of the Math, after their Master, did transform relief and other services as a form of worship from already 1897 onwards with its leader Swami Ahkandananda. And their relief services had reached far and wide in India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, be they cyclones, floods, earthquakes, Tsunamis, landslides, droughts, and the like.<sup>53</sup>

Rehabilitating the victims of such calamities form part of their philosophy of work and service. Their service is primarily driven by the worship of God in the humans and strictly a-political. They reach out to the most needy, indiscriminate of caste, creed, region, or language. They involve local people and other volunteers with the help of current tools and technical experts. Their programmes are always time-bound, wasting no resources with the focus on socio-economic and cultural empowerment. The long years of experience has taught the inmates of the Math knowledge and skills in disaster management, environment friendly safeguards, and victim rehabilitation, inspiring countless other organizations and service groups.

### *Women and Youth welfare programmes*

Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission have a number of programmes for women and the youth. They serve women through educational training centres, medical and health care clinics, hospital and nursing centres, and old-age homes. They form self-help groups, impart vocational training to make them self-dependent. Specific programmes to women are many like service to pregnant mothers, widowed, old, and the destitute.

### *Spiritual and Cultural services*

There are recreational and cultural centres for children (Balak sanghas) and the youth (Yuvak sanghas). These centres provide value education,

<sup>52</sup> Shi Shankar Chakraborty: *Social Work Practice: Work and Worship*, Selected Papers and Essays, Anjali Publishers, Kolkata, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2009, P. 61

<sup>53</sup> One good example of the Math's relief services is during the recent “Nilam” cyclone from 29<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> of October 2013, which left people in Nagapattinam District of Tamilnadu utter misery. Over 81000 hectares of agricultural land had submerged under water. Sri Ramakrishna Math's relief services were extended to over 10,000 people of that locality, providing cooked food twice a day and for children with biscuits and milk. The math also supplied clothes to more than 2000 families.



health and nutritional awareness, and devotional prayers and chants. The Math and Mission lay emphasis on spiritual and cultural formation to all, based on the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, wife and spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna, known and called endearly as 'Holy Mother', and Swami Vivekananda. They have organized class rooms lectures, audio-visual units, retreats, public meetings, and celebrations. In the academic year 2012-13 alone, more than 3.8 million had attended these events.<sup>54</sup> The Math has a number of mobile units known as 'Jnana Vahinia' that keep moving to villages and towns, showing educative and religious movies, exhibitions, book sales, meditation, and the like. The Math official website mentions more than 1 million beneficiaries from such mobile units.<sup>55</sup>

### *Intellectual Services and Yearly Celebrations*

Their library services and reading rooms serve every year more than 1.8 million attendees. The Math and Mission regularly publishes several books in year besides running 24 journals in different language. More than 2.7 billion IN rupees have been spent in 2012-13 alone. Besides these, the Math and Mission maintain temple and prayer-meditation halls to impart higher values. They take pride in celebrations of birthdays and feast days of great saints and prophets, crossing boundaries of creed. Every year they celebrate Christmas.

### **The Coming Together as the Common Response**

To conclude, Sri Ramakrishna Movement's vision of the world order is not a God who is abstract, unconcerned to the universe. The universe is His own Self (Advaita) and His manifestation, and God cannot escape it in its multidimensional progress or deterioration. Commitment to the universe is simultaneously a restoration of the image of (broken) God. Such an Advaitic inspiration to serve the whole humanity and nature is the process of evolution towards the fullness of God. It urges human communities such as Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission to participate in the great yaga, *the making of the God-Universe*. It is pertinent and urgent for the human communities to come together in an ecumenical

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<sup>54</sup> Spiritual and Cultural Work: <http://www.belurmath.org/activities.htm#Tribal>

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

gathering to seek ways and means to make use of our own potential resources towards the making of the God-Universe.

This ecumenical sense of *connectedness* is one of embracing and celebrating life together, despite differences. Shaking hands with and serving together with organizations like Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission are one realistic way of doing dialogue in a pluralistic milieu such as in India. India and the globe needs understanding and go beyond toleration towards dialogue and fusion. And to realize this, organizations need to go beyond mere discursive, cognitive clarity concerning religions to pay attention to ethical priorities. The pressing question is how to save humanity and the universe from the pending disaster. We need to look at our own personal and collective religious and moral resources. Have religions and their movements lost their significance today?

Perhaps sadly, the dialogue between religions at theological level has hardly reconciled communities or solved their religious conflicts. At the most, it has opened up the gates of reason for attitudinal changes. It is the task of socio-religious movements such as Sri. Ramakrishna Math and Mission to seek inter-faith ties and collaboration with other movements and religious traditions in order to discover *common ground* and *common space* for dialogue. A genuine effort will amount to a shared conversion toward warding off evil and generating good hope in people, particularly the poor and the marginalized.

IDCR, Loyola College  
Chennai

# Rissho Kosei-Kai and the Search for Interreligious Harmony and Peace

Leo D. Lefebure

Rissho Kosei-Kai, a movement founded by the lay Buddhists, is particularly significant and influential in enhancing human personality, communication, and peace ideal in the Japanese contemporary life. The article shows how this is done by the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures, particularly the Lotus Sutra.

**Dr. Leo Lefebure** <ll253 @ georgetown. edu> is Professor of Theology and Matteo Ricci Chair in Georgetown University, Washington DC. A scholar of Buddhist studies, Leo has a wide range of interest in Religions and comparative religious studies. His recent books are *True and Holy: Christian Scripture and Other Religions*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013, Co-authored with Peter Feldmeier: *The Path of Wisdom: A Christian Commentary on the Dhammapada*, Grand Rapids, MI, and Leuven: Eerdmans Publishing Company and Peeters, 2011, *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000.

## Nikkyo Niwano

In the twentieth century, a number of movements arose in Japan seeking to renew the Buddhist tradition and apply its teachings to contemporary life in the world. One of the most significant and influential of these is Rissho Kosei-kai, which was founded as an organization of Buddhist laypersons on March 5, 1938 by Nikkyo Niwano and Myoko Naganuma in order to spread the teachings of the Buddha in the Lotus Sutra.<sup>1</sup> After Naganuma's death in 1957, Niwano continued as the sole

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kisala, *Prophets of Peace: Pacifism and Cultural Identity in Japan's New Religions* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 98.

leader. Central to this project was Niwano's interpretation of the Lotus Sutra as proposing a "peace ideology."<sup>2</sup> Niwano explains the meaning of the society's name:

*Rissho* means 'to stand on the true teaching,' that is, to depend on the universal truth as revealed by Sakyamuni. *Kosei* means 'the perfection of men's personality through mutual communication and encouragement.' According, *Rissho Kosei-kai* is a "Society organized by people of the same faith in order to realize a happy world by making efforts to perfect men's personality through mutual communication and encouragement on the basis of the true teaching proclaimed by Sakyamuni."<sup>3</sup>

Niwano later recalled that his early life was decisively shaped by his encounter with the Lotus Sutra; as a result, during his youth he worked to spread the message of the Lotus Sutra. Later his focus broadened to include social issues. "In the second half of my life, my activities deepened in the social sphere, widening to an international scope, as I became convinced that the Lotus Sutra is the vehicle of world peace."<sup>4</sup> One formative influence was his military service in the Japanese navy in the 1920s, which left him opposed to war; he later recalled that "one of the greatest harvests from my military experience was the reinforcement of my philosophy of nonviolence."<sup>5</sup>

Niwano applied the traditional Buddhist principles of the Eightfold Path and the Six Perfections to concrete personal and social and political issues in the present.<sup>6</sup> Niwano grounded his movement's approach to establishing harmony in the teaching of the Lotus Sutra on the way to peace through not bearing grudges. When Shakyamuni Buddha was attacked by his cousin Devadatta, he did not respond by seeking

<sup>2</sup> Nikkyo Niwano, *A Buddhist Approach to Peace* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 1982), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Nikkyo Niwano, *Rissho Kosei-kai* (Tokyo: Hinode Printing Co. and Kosei Publishing Co., 1966), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Niwano, quoted by Kisalā, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Niwano, *Rissho Kosei-kai*, 55-65; see also Nikkyo Niwano, *Buddhism for Everyday Life: Memorable Dharmā Messages from a Long Spiritual Journey*, trans. Susan Murata (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 2011); and Nikkyo Niwano, *Shakyamuni Buddha: A Narrative Biography*. Trans. Kojiro Miyasaka and Rebecca M. Davis (revised English ed.; Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 1989).



vengeance but by peacefully remaining calm. When Devadatta sent a charging elephant to attack the Buddha, “the Buddha, radiating benevolence, calmly approached the elephant. And it is said that the elephant quite suddenly became gentle and, after kneeling solemnly to the Buddha, turned away.”<sup>7</sup> Even though Devadatta was not immediately won over to peace, his followers one by one abandoned him so that he was deserted. Even though what Devadatta did was evil, Niwano emphasized the good that came out of this crisis:

First, owing to the fact that there was such a traitor of the Law as Devadatta, the righteousness of the middle path which preached as one of His basic ideas, became clearer and clearer, and the whole community of Sakyamuni took a right course without turning aside to a wrong way. Second, owing to the fact that Devadatta revealed his weak points as a man and a most terrible nature of man, Sakyamuni Himself learned something from it and His enlightenment grew deeper.<sup>8</sup>

Niwano emphasizes the importance of the Lotus Sutra for resolving conflicts nonviolently: “Buddhism in general and the Lotus Sutra in particular are profound teachings on peace. This is because Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, who expounded the teachings, actually lived his life in accord with the teachings he handed down to us.”<sup>9</sup> Niwano recalls the saying of the Buddha that “if one seeks retribution for vengeance through revenge, the chain can never be broken,” and adds: “these are important teachings that we should be practicing right now.”<sup>10</sup> Niwano cites the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha in the Dhammapada: “For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time: hatred ceases by love, this is an unchanging Law.”<sup>11</sup> Niwano saw this as a model for international relations, and he praised the decision of the government of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) at the 1951 peace treaty conference in San Francisco, where

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<sup>7</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Nikkyo Niwano, *The Lotus Sutra Life and Soul of Buddhism: A Modern Introduction to the Lotus Sutra Giving a Better Understanding of the Buddha's Teachings* (Tokyo: Hinode Printing Co. and Kosei Publishing Co., 1971), 132.

<sup>9</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 24-25.

"Mr. Jayewardene, the representative of Ceylon, prefacing his remarks with quotes from the Dhammapada, stated that the country of Ceylon had no intention of seeking war reparations from Japan. Thunderous applause greeted this statement."<sup>12</sup>

Niwano was aware that the practice of peacemaking can lead to suffering, and he praised the example of Mahatma Gandhi, who was fatally shot by a militant Hindu. As Gandhi was being carried on a stretcher immediately after the shooting, he made the traditional hand gesture of the Buddha known in Japanese as *semui*, holding an open right hand close to the chest with the palm facing outward, which means "to give a power that is fearless according to the truth."<sup>13</sup> Niwano exhorts his followers: "To suffer any hardship for the sake of the Law and not only to endure hardship patiently but also to go anywhere and actively preach the Law - this is the very essence of the practice of the apostles of peace who are devoted to non-violence."<sup>14</sup>

Niwano reads the celebrated parables of the Lotus Sutra in a similar fashion, noting the lessons for peacemaking. He notes recalls the Lotus Sutra's description of the bodhisattva who bowed to everyone he met, saying: "I cannot despise you, because you will all become Buddhas"; when people thought he was mocking them and attacked him, he did not respond in kind but continued his path of respect, eventually becoming Shakyamuni Buddha in a later life.<sup>15</sup>

Niwano interprets the Lotus Sutra as teaching:

There is a single, invisible entity that is embodied in all things existing in our universe. This is the great life force of the universe. All things in this world fundamentally are of this one entity. Therefore, though phenomena appear in infinite variety, essentially they are equal in their existence.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Nikkyo Niwano, "Foreword," in in Homer A. Jack, *WCRP: A History of the World Conference on Religion and Peace* (New York; World Conference on Religion and Peace, 1993), 22.

<sup>16</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 36.

The fundamental nature of all things is *shunyata* (voidness or emptiness). Niwano explains:

Voidness is the only one, real existence that makes everything and every phenomenon of the universe. Scientifically speaking, it is the fundamental energy that is manifested in all phenomena, and religiously speaking, it is the great life force that permeates everything that exists in the universe, namely, the Eternal, Original Buddha.<sup>17</sup>

If we realize this truth, then we see all beings in the universe as our brothers and sisters: "One will be filled with a sense of harmony and cooperation."<sup>18</sup> This is the basis for compassion, *karuna*: "When one sees others moaning in suffering or agony, one cannot refrain from moaning oneself. . . . If all people in the world had this sense of *jihī* (benevolence), how could they hate or have ill feelings toward others? How could they fight wars?"<sup>19</sup> Niwano's quest for peace is grounded in this vision of the universe: "[The view springs from a deep realization of the true nature of the universe. As such, it is deep-rooted, firm, and constant through all phenomenal changes."<sup>20</sup>

Humans face a fundamental choice in constituting their mental attitude toward the universe: "Therefore, in the human mind there exists the potential to fall into hell as well as to rise to the state of Buddhahood."<sup>21</sup> This leads Niwano to a deep-seated hope regarding human potential: "We tend to think, 'I can't change myself.' However, we should realize that this is not so; we *can* change ourselves if we try hard enough. We even can become buddhas."<sup>22</sup> By acknowledging the universal equality of all persons, Niwano hoped that humans could come to see "the equal Buddha-nature (potential to become a Buddha) within the personalities of others. And we come to respect those whom we have despised or considered quite incapable."<sup>23</sup> Humans are an integral part of nature.

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<sup>17</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 40.

Since the Buddha-nature embraces all beings, including plants and the earth, this vision sees all beings as manifesting the Original Buddha, which is the great life of the universe. This perspective led Niwano to reject an anthropocentric course that sought human happiness at the expense of other beings: "It is time for us to return to the spirit of the Lotus Sutra, which teaches us to live in harmony with nature and with other beings, letting each form of existence fulfill its potential to perfect its own buddha-nature."<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, Robert Kisala points out that "Niwano and Rissho Koseikai do not advocate a strictly pacifist position. In his writings Niwano makes a distinction between the ideal aimed at and the reality with which we are face, and, for example, the necessity of a Self-Defense Force is explained by means of the analogy of public safety."<sup>25</sup>

### Interreligious Relations

Niwano believed that the essential meaning of all religion is universal and adopted a harmonizing approach to other religious traditions. "My humble efforts for peace are based on interfaith cooperation, and this cooperation is based on the idea that the essential meaning of every religion is essentially the same."<sup>26</sup> Thus he assimilated the life force that the Buddhist tradition names *shunyata* (voidness) or Buddha to belief in God in theistic traditions: "Therefore Buddhism calls this fundamental life force 'Buddha' and Christianity calls it 'God'; Judaism, 'Yahweh'; Islam, 'Allah.'"<sup>27</sup> Niwano interprets religious differences as arising from the variety of communities around the globe, each with its own *kami* (supernatural being or beings), variously understood as a local protecting spirit or as the fundamental life force of the universe. In addition to following the Lotus Sutra, Niwano drew inspiration from the teaching of the Bible: "The Bible says, 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' Peacemakers should first develop the practice of constantly extinguishing their own greed and struggling to overcome their own egoism. Such people will be protected by God and the Buddha."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 52.

<sup>25</sup> Kisala, 107.

<sup>26</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Niwano, "Foreword," in *WCRP: A History*, 24.



Niwano saw religious rivalry as arising from misunderstanding and leading to violence. Since he believed that the Original Buddha and the God of Christianity are identical, infinite and ineffable, he thought they should not become the subject of controversy: "I myself believe that the God in Christianity and the Eternal, Original Buddha in Buddhism are quite the same. Isn't it limiting or belittling the Supreme Being for people to add explanations that God and the Buddha, which are boundless existences, are such and such, or describe their functions and powers, or compare God and the Buddha while discussing their differences?"<sup>29</sup> Given this confidence that religions are essentially one, at one stage of his career he hoped to promote religious unification. However, he encountered such strong opposition that he shifted his goal from unification of religious or interfaith cooperation. Grounding his call for interfaith cooperation is his trust that there is already a fundamental point of oneness: "In essence, every great world religion preaches love for mankind and tries to provide peace of mind. Religious believers generally have a far stronger love for mankind and desire for peace than those lacking faith."<sup>30</sup>

In March 1965, Paul Cardinal Marella, who was the first President of the Secretariat for non-Christians in the Vatican, visited Japan and invited Niwano to attend the final session of the Second Vatican Council. During this time the Catholic Church was going through a far-reaching transformation of its attitude and relationship to other religious traditions, including Buddhism. Niwano was profoundly impressed by the changed attitude among Catholic leaders: "Once the Catholic Church was stubborn and authoritative. . . . By freeing itself of that stubbornness, the Vatican and the Catholic Church with its 500 million believers in the world have undergone a remarkable revolution during the last years."<sup>31</sup>

Niwano was deeply moved by the solemnity of the opening ceremony on September 14, 1965, and by the words of Pope Paul VI on peace and ecumenism. The following day Niwano met personally with Pope Paul, who encouraged Niwano to continue his activities for interfaith cooperation, exhorting him: "It is important for people of religion not to

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<sup>29</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 126.

<sup>30</sup> Pope Paul VI, quoted by Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Niwano, *Rissho Kosei-kai*, 101.

cling to factions or denominations but to recognize each other and pray for each other.”<sup>32</sup> Niwano later recalled: “During the interview we kept our hands together. This strong shaking of hands expressed the cooperation, friendship and mutual understanding between Buddhism and Catholicism in a very special way.”<sup>33</sup> He further reflected: “Although there are differences with regard to the words and teaching, it may safely be said that Catholicism is the same as Buddhism with regard to what is essential, that is, the way for mankind to attain peace and the way for human beings to live.”<sup>34</sup>

Niwano and Pope Paul VI shared a profound concern for world peace; and when they met, they expressed a deep respect for each other’s traditions. In the long history of the Catholic Church, there have been many church councils, but this was the first time that a Buddhist leader has attended an ecumenical council. After the meeting with Pope Paul, Niwano commented:

On my way back to the hotel after meeting the Pope, I thought that Buddhism and Christianity must come from the same source. There is no difference between the compassion of Buddhism and the love of Christianity. Basically, they teach us to forgive each other, to be tolerant and open-minded, to exercise mutual warmth and caring, and to lead happy and peaceful lives. . . . There in the Vatican, I felt an affirmation of the truth and the world. It can be said that at that time I finally became able to cherish hope of the possibility of holding a peace conference at which all religious leaders in the world would gather to discuss world peace.<sup>35</sup>

## The Quest for Peace

In 1963 Niwano was part of the Peace Delegation of Religious Leaders for Banning Nuclear Weapons, which invited religious leaders around the world to work for peace by limiting and eventually banning nuclear arms. They issued a Peace Proposal in September 1963, and Niwano

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<sup>32</sup> Pope Paul VI, quoted by Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 87.

<sup>33</sup> Niwano, *Rissho Kosei-kai*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Niwano, *Rissho Kosei-kai*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 88.

was a vice-chair of the delegation that brought it to Rome and presented it to Pope Paul VI, who welcomed the delegation and the proposal warmly, commenting: "I would like to express my deep respect and gratitude to you all, who have come from afar with the great aim of banning nuclear weapons and realizing world peace. . . . I totally agree with your peace declaration."<sup>36</sup> The delegation then continued to Geneva, Switzerland, where they met Secretary General Visser't Hooft of the World Council of Churches, who also strongly endorsed the proposal. The delegation toured the world, meeting many prominent political and religious leaders, though President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev did not meet with them. Nonetheless, Niwano thought the delegation accomplished a major side-effect: "As a byproduct of this mission, many religious people understood and cooperated with each other in purpose and action, transcending sectarianism far more than they had ever anticipated. I sense at that time that the day of the religious cooperation that I had been advocating was dawning, and I felt inexpressible joy."<sup>37</sup>

## WCRP

Niwano's meetings with many religious leaders and his continuing activities for peace led him to help organize the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) in Istanbul in January 1969.<sup>38</sup> He later commented that in undertaking this project he was directly inspired by the example of the Catholic leaders at the Second Vatican Council, who voted 2308 to 70 to approve *Nostra Aetate (The Declaration of the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions)*.<sup>39</sup> At the first assembly of WCRP in Kyoto in October 1970, leaders from the Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, Shinto, Confucian, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, Zoroastrian, Jain, and Bahai traditions all participated. In his opening address to the assembly, Niwano stated: "At one time, various religions, precisely because of their own convictions, were unable to cooperate and were

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<sup>36</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 82.

<sup>37</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 83.

<sup>38</sup> Dana McLean Greeley, "Foreword," in Homer A. Jack, *WCRP: A History of the World Conference on Religion and Peace* (New York: World Conference on Religion and Peace, 1993), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 112.

even antagonistic to each other. But the times have changed. . . It is my firm belief that religion alone can provide the motive power to create a peaceful world, not through armed might but through respect for humanity.”<sup>40</sup> A few days later, Roman Catholic Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil stated: “Some years ago, a meeting such as this would have been unthinkable. And, let us admit, even today, each one of us is aware of the difficulties he has to face within his own congregation. The important fact is that the miracle of our being here has been accomplished by the Lord.”<sup>41</sup>

Later Niwano looked back on the question that challenged the organizers:

We asked ourselves whether, in order to rid the world of the sense of distrust that fills people and to wrestle with the various causes that prevent peace, it wasn't necessary for representatives of the various world religions, whose mission it is to serve peace and mankind, to gather together and discuss matters concerning peace. They should become of one mind and respond to the various issues that confront religion today.<sup>42</sup>

The conference led to the establishment in 1971 of a new international, interreligious organization, with a slightly changed name: the World Conference of Religion for Peace.<sup>43</sup> The new organization established an international secretariat in New York City close to the United Nations headquarters and also decided to send a delegation to South Vietnam. In 1971 the officers of the organization met in New Delhi, seeking greater cooperation with Hindu, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Sikh, and Buddhist leaders, as well as those of other traditions. In 1972 there was an Interreligious Consultation on Japanese-American Relations held in Hawaii, seeking to resolve differences and promote mutual understanding and trust at a time of major tension over trade relations.

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<sup>40</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 95.

<sup>41</sup> Helder Camara, quoted by Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 106.

<sup>42</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 131.

<sup>43</sup> The British group called itself the World Conference of Religions for Peace. Homer A. Jack, *WCRP: A History of the World Conference on Religion and Peace* (New York: World Conference on Religion and Peace, 1993), 25-26.



The second meeting of WCRP was in Louvain, Belgium in August 1974. Again Niwano addressed the assembly. In November 1976, the Asian Conference on Religion and Peace (ACRP) was held in Singapore, a site with bitter memories of Japanese atrocities during the Second World War. This meeting, which was hosted by the Inter-Religious Organization of Singapore, focused on issues of importance to Asian and Pacific nations and peoples. Japanese representatives repented what the Japanese nation had done to other Asian people during the Second World War and asked what they could do to promote peace. Participants in the conference went either to the Kranji War Memorial for the military who died during the war or to the Memorial Tower, which honors the civilian victims, for interfaith prayer services. Niwano led the prayer at the Kranji War Memorial, accepting “a deep sense of responsibility and repentance for Japan’s part in the war. We all prayed together, and I offered a bouquet of flowers. The sky was clear, and the sound of many languages united in prayer was solemn yet warm.”<sup>44</sup> Mother Teresa of Calcutta was among the participants, describing her role: “I attend this conference as the representative of the poorest among the poor.”<sup>45</sup> The conference addressed the desperate situation of those fleeing Vietnam who were often victims of violence at sea and who had difficulty finding asylum in the nearby nations. One result of this conference was the organization of the Boat People Rescue Project to assist these people.

WCRP has sponsored numerous symbolic gestures. Young people of Rissho Kosei-kai built a Friendship Tower in the Philippines, hoping to overcome the bitter legacy of Japanese atrocities during World War II. The governor of Bataan conferred the title of “Son of Bataan” upon the Japanese RKK youth, a recognition especially significant in light of the infamous Bataan Death March during the Pacific War.

Another remarkable development occurred in 1992, during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, when the Holy See of the Roman Catholic Church recognized Niwano’s contributions to interreligious relations and to world peace by naming him a Knight Commander with

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<sup>44</sup> Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 147.

<sup>45</sup> Mother Teresa, quoted by Niwano, *Buddhist Approach to Peace*, 148-49.

the Silver Star of the Order of St. Gregory, one of the most distinguished honors in the Roman Catholic community. This recognition is a sign of the friendship and partnership to which Buddhists and Catholics are called. Two years later, in 1994, Niwano joined with Pope John Paul II in presiding over the Sixth Session of the World Conference for Religions and Peace in the Vatican.

Like other movements seeking peace, WCRP faces the challenges of how to handle violent threats and situations. While there is much good will in the efforts of WCRP, Robert Kisala is critical of WCRP for advocating peace while not formulating specific criteria for the use of force or concrete proposals for handling violent conflicts. After interviewing WCRP leaders and surveying Rissho Kosei-kai members, Kisala concluded: "Although on an official doctrinal level Rissho Koseikai recognizes the need for arms in a world not yet perfect, the reluctance to speak of situations where the use of force might be necessary, to offer criteria, or a 'policy' for its use, seems to have left the members confused as to what position to take on the concrete matters of war and peace."<sup>46</sup>

Rev. Niwano believed that the great religions of the world spring from a common root and share a common concern to alleviate suffering. His cordial relations with Catholics and with followers of many religious traditions were indeed remarkable, and they stand as a shining example of interfaith friendship and cooperation. The gathering space of Rissho Kosei-kai, Fumon Hall, is significant as "the gate open to all peoples," standing as a powerful witness to Niwano's vision.

Georgetown University  
Washington DC

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<sup>46</sup> Kisala, 110-11.

# The Hizmet Movement and Christian-Muslim Understanding

J.M.P. Thomas Birla

Muhammad Fethullah Gülen's Hizmet movement is very recent and quite active in many countries among people of all walks of life and irrespective of age. The founder advocates constructive modernity in the light of the sacred texts, and no peaceful coexistence is possible without education and dialogue. *Rev. J.M.P. Thomas Birla* <[birla27@yahoo.com](mailto:birla27@yahoo.com)> is at present the Presbyterian at All Saints' Cathedral, Shillong, belonging to Church of North India (CNI). He did his theological studies in Religion at Bishop's College, Kolkata, and Arabic and Post graduate diploma in Islam at Henry martin Institute, Hyderabad.

## Introduction

Although he never claimed himself as its founder, the Hizmet movement is linked to a key figure, Muhammed Fethullah Gülen, who can be rightly called as its initiator. Gülen managed to initiate a socio-religious movement, which people named after him as the Gülen movement, which is now active in several countries.<sup>1</sup> It is one of the most active Muslim initiatives for, among other things, interfaith understanding, in modern times. The teachings of Gülen and the vision of the movement that he inspired can be encapsulated in the term *hizmet*, which literally means 'service'-service to God and to fellow human beings. Therefore, this movement is also been popularly known as the Hizmet movement.

## Short Biography of Fethullah Gülen

Fethullah Gülen was born in 1941 in eastern Turkey. His father, Ramiz Efendi, was a government-employed *imam* who performed his duties in various regions. He received much knowledge from his father, who was well-versed in the Quran and the life of Prophet Muhammad. Gülen also

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see Ali Ünal and Alphonse Williams, *Advocate of Dialogue: Fethullah Gülen*, Virginia: The Fountain, 2000.



learnt Arabic and Persian from him.<sup>2</sup> Gülen's mother, Refia, had a major influence on his religious and spiritual upbringing.<sup>3</sup> Outside of his family, Muhammed Lüfti Efendi, an influential Sufi master and poet, had a great influence on him. Gülen was also introduced to the teachings of the renowned Turkish Islamic scholar Said Nursi (1876-1960), who encouraged Muslims to accept constructive modernity in the light of the sacred texts.

Gülen developed a wide and deep knowledge about religion and modern sciences through his study from various distinguished scholars. As a result, in 1958 he was awarded a state preacher's license. His sermons and speeches did not address and answer only the religious quest of the people but also enlightened them about education, science, social justice and humanity. This enabled him to reach a wide range of audiences from different walks of life, including students, scholars, the poor, and both religious and non-religious people.<sup>4</sup> He emphasised the need for human beings to support one another and to live in harmony in the midst of their differences.<sup>5</sup> He reached the conclusion that only through education, dialogue and the proper understanding of one's own religion could there be peaceful co-existence among people in the midst of their differences.<sup>6</sup> Having reached this conclusion, Gülen began to put his ideas into action, which eventually took the form of a movement.

### Formation of the Hizmet Movement

Starting in the 1960s, Gülen managed to inspire a vast civic movement, called the Hizmet movement, by virtue of his thoughts and writings.<sup>7</sup> In 1966, Gülen was transferred to a mosque in Izmir. There he was not only responsible for a mosque but was also a director of a *Kestanepazari* or Quranic school. It was there that Gülen started to implement his pragmatic ideas, which took shape as a movement in the later years. Soon after he took charge in Izmir, he began to attempt to promote a different method of education. He started encouraging people to

<sup>2</sup> Fethullah Gülen, "Years of Education," <http://www.fethullah-gulen.org/biography.html>

<sup>3</sup> Mehmet Enes Ergene, *Tradition Witnessing The Modern Age: An Analysis of the Gülen Movement*, New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2009, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Mehmet Enes Ergene, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Mehmet Enes Ergene, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Rose Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam*, Houston: Springer, 2010, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> For more details, see M. Fethullah Gülen, *Essays- Perspectives-Opinions*, New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2010.



participate in conversations, seminars and conferences in mosques and homes. He wanted to educate the youth in both secular subjects and the principles of morality. He also initiated dialogue among people representing different ideologies, cultures, nationalities and religions. By inviting these people to various meetings, he provided them opportunities to come together. He was of the opinion that this was necessary for a sincere dialogue in order to increase mutual understanding and peace.

After noticing his sincerity and seriousness, people from all walks of life, such as students, teachers, workers, business people, men and women, joined him. He inspired them to support the noble cause he was engaged in, both financially and physically. At the same time, Gülen made sure that these initiatives had no political or ideological objectives.<sup>8</sup> Within a decade, the movement became a transnational phenomenon, as its projects spread to other parts of the world. In India, this movement was started at New Delhi in 1999. Having New Delhi as the main base in India, it gradually started to spread its activities in various parts of the country. At present, there are six centres of the movement in India: in New Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai and Bangalore.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Hizmet Movement**

- To impart spiritual, metaphysical and philosophical knowledge about God, the world and the purpose of human life.
- To avoid economic, political or cultural power, and, instead, serve humankind altruistically, without any expectation.
- To eradicate social ills, such as illiteracy, poverty and social polarization.
- To promote social peace and friendship by stressing the common values of humanity, such as tolerance, respect and compassion.

### **Major Teachings on Interfaith Relations**

The Quran and the Sunnah, the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, are the guiding principles of the Hizmet Movement. According to Gülen, religion is not simply rituals and worship. Rather, it includes according true meaning to humanity by embracing the whole of individual and collective life.<sup>9</sup> True religion, according to him, never engenders conflicts among human beings on the basis of religious differences. These conflicts

<sup>8</sup> Mehmet Enes Ergene, op. cit., p.13.

<sup>9</sup> Gülen firmly believes that religion is not responsible for clashes between people of different faiths in society. The only way to avoid this conflict is to allow religion, with its life-giving values, to tincture all our intentions and actions. See, M. Fethullah Gülen,

occur, rather, due to ignorance, personal benefits or the pursuit of the perceived interests of particular groups. Accordingly, Gülen considers that the only way to solve this problem is to properly educate human beings. Proper and meaningful education is a must for human beings in order to avoid deception and misguidance and to reach right decisions in their lives.<sup>10</sup> Mehmet Enes Ergene rightly remarks that for Gülen, education should help us to keep our own identity along with recognizing the existing pluralism of cultures, civilizations and faiths. The Hizmet movement proposes the integration of spiritual and traditional values along with modern education.<sup>11</sup> Through its teachings on education, it looks forward to a religious renaissance.

The Hizmet movement firmly believes that every religion has some basic elements that are conducive to constructive interfaith activities and strongly recommends the brotherhood/sisterhood among people of faith. Our challenge is to trace out these binding values from our scriptures and traditions.<sup>12</sup> This can be of great use to prove that dialoguing is one of God's commands to us and that it is not a sin or an irreligious activity.<sup>13</sup> Gülen finds the roots of interreligious dialogue in the verses of Holy Quran. Even every chapter in the Holy Quran begins with the praise of God's attributes as "the Compassionate and the Merciful." Moreover, he quotes the famous Quranic verse:

All humankind, we have created you from male and female and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another (49:13)

Gülen takes this Quranic statement very seriously and interprets it to mean that God expects Muslims to be compassionate and merciful to all people, irrespective of ethnicity, colour, and religion. This is what Jesus Christ, too, taught: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). This commandment can be fulfilled only through love and dialogue with other religious people.

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*The Statue of Our Souls: Revival in Islamic Thought and Activism*, New Jersey: The Light, 2005, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> M. Fethullah Gülen, *Toward A Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, New Jersey: The Light, 2006, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> Ali Ünal and Alphonse Williams, op. cit., p. 308. This can certainly help us to better understand that science and religion are not contradictory, but, rather, complementary to each other.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Rose Ebaugh, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> John L. Esposito and Ihsan Yilmaz (eds.), *Islam and Peace Building: Gülen Movement Initiatives*, New York: Blue Dome Press, 20



## Perspective on Christian-Muslim Relations

The roots of Christian-Muslim relations can be traced to the very scriptural origins of Islam. For instance, the Quran states:

“The closest in affection to [Muslims] are those who say: ‘We are Christians’, for among them are priests and monks and they are not arrogant” (5:82), and

“Say, O People of the Book (followers of Moses and Jesus)! Come to common terms between you and us, that we will worship none but God, that we will not associate partners with Him, that we erect not from ourselves patrons other than God” (3:64)

By interpreting such verses of the Holy Quran, the Hizmet movement has been constantly emphasising the necessity of brotherly/sisterly relations among the ‘People of the Book’.

The contributions of the Hizmet movement in seeking to improve Christian-Muslim relations are very evident not only at the theoretical level but also at the practical level. For instance, Gülen’s meeting with the Christian leaders, like the late Pope John Paul II, the Archbishop of Constantinople and others to discuss in furthering dialogue activities between Muslims and Christians. The movement also plays a vital role during times of crisis, acting as a catalyst or a glue to restore broken relationships. Gülen was one of the first Islamic scholars to denounce the terrorist attacks of 9/11, saying that “... terror can never be used in the name of Islam or for the sake of any Islamic ends. A terrorist cannot be a true Muslim and a true Muslim cannot be a terrorist. A Muslim can only be representative and symbol of peace, welfare and prosperity.”

In India, within a short span of time the Hizmet movement has established good relations with Indian churches and church-based organizations. There is ample scope for the movement to engage in and promote interfaith dialogue with Christian, Hindu and other religious groups in the country. The Indialogue Foundation, which is linked to the Hizmet movement, has organised several inter-faith meetings, seminars, Ramadan dinners and other activities in different parts of India in an effort to find common ground between people of different faiths and to promote friendly relations among them. Like the Indian Church, the Hizmet movement has been very active in promoting interfaith dialogue as well as educational institutions. These two parallels, in particular, can bring the Hizmet movement and the Church closer together, urging Christians and Muslims to work together as brothers and sisters.